

ISSN 0252-8169

# Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics

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Volume 48 | Number 2 | Summer 2025

*In the loving memory of*  
**Prof. Susan L. Feagin** (1948-2024)  
*Temple University, USA*

*Published by*  
Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute  
of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics

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Layout and Typesetting: Amarendra Mahapatra  
Printed in India by Dhara Shree Radha Trust, Bhubaneswar

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Website: [www.jcla.in](http://www.jcla.in)

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# Gardening as Artistic Practice

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DAVID FENNER

**Abstract:** The activity of gardening can be conceived as a form of artistic practice, offering opportunities for ongoing creativity while following a brief; cooperating with nature and with other gardeners; curating and editing what is present; accepting, seeking out, and then acting on assessments; surrendering control by finishing a work of art; and then surrendering ownership of the product of one's creative efforts. Gardening is an especially good way to learn and reinforce these lessons as a garden presents a near perfect opportunity to practice one's artistic skills over and over again.

*Keywords:* Garden, gardening, art, creativity

In 1993, Mara Miller wrote a book focused on whether and how a garden can be a work of art.<sup>1</sup> This question was taken up as part of a book written by Stephanie Ross in 1998 on whether gardens can be bearers of meaning.<sup>2</sup> And it was again taken up, although in a small way, in a book written by David Cooper in 2006 on the character of garden and gardening appreciation.<sup>3</sup> While Ross and Cooper both shed valuable light on the status of The Garden (capitalized to indicate the kind) as an artform, it was Miller who offered a positive argument for the claim that some gardens are indeed works of art. While Miller and Cooper both say that garden philosophy is a field that should not be restricted to aesthetic inquiry, Ross makes the point that it is with aesthetics that garden philosophy should begin – a claim to which neither Miller nor Cooper would object. So long as we agree that thinking about gardens in the ways philosophers might entails thinking about them as aesthetic objects, there is no need to settle the question here on whether a garden can be a work of art. In other words, one can engage in artistic practices even when the object of that practice is not a work of art but rather simply possesses artistic aspects. There are aspects of the character of gardening that make its practice artistic in character. Each of these ways – I have six – form the section headings of the paper.

Similarly, there is likely no need, for the sake of this paper, to circumscribe what counts as a garden and what does not. While, with a colleague, I do this elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> we can take a garden here as any focus of typical garden practice, since it is the practice of gardening on which this paper is meant to focus. “Typical garden practice” includes designing and redesigning the garden, preparing the site and the site's components, planting and arranging, irrigating, composting and fertilizing, weeding, controlling pests, staking and bracing plants, propagating and grafting, pruning, replacing dead or dying plants and broken artifactual components, and other activities that are meant to secure the health and virtues of a garden as well as the larger ecology (such as visiting pollinators) in which the garden is sited.

## Following a Brief

In the garden theory literature, the person or persons who plans, designs, and installs a garden is called a gardenist or gardenists.<sup>5</sup> The analogue with “artist” is obvious, and the analogue with “architect” is obvious when, in some contexts, we refer to gardenists as landscape architects. The latter has been preferred in some circles because it connotes a level of education, credentialing, and profes-

sionalism,<sup>6</sup> but it may be simpler: it may be that we think of landscape architects as working on large projects that are typically gardens that frame significant buildings, are civic parks, or are placed on public land. The dividing lines are not terribly clear – the history of the reference really amounted to personal preference — nor do they really need to be in cases that are not focused on matters like licensure or professional association.<sup>7</sup>

If gardenists are thinking about installing a garden on land they own, they may do as they wish, within the bounds of agreements or laws that limit how a piece of land may be developed. For instance, many in the United States live in neighborhoods governed in some measure by Home Owners' Associations, and so there may be limitations on the sort of garden one can install at one's residence. But, in general, one can plant what one wishes and how one wishes on land that is one's own. This is typically the case, too, for allotment gardens, where one working a plot may decide to plant vegetables, herbs, flowers, or some combination.

Setting aside issues of guerilla gardening (that is, gardening on land one does not own or control) for the moment, in cases where gardenists are designing and installing a garden on land they do not own (including public land), gardenists must work within a set of parameters set by whomever controls the land. I say "controls" rather than owns, because in many cases, gardens are installed on public land, university land, corporately-held land, and so forth, and it will not be owners *per se* that set the parameters, but agents whose responsibility includes disposition of that land. We may think of the "controllers" of the land in the same way we think of those who commission works of art or of art patrons. While the designs will be those of the gardenists, they must satisfy the general parameters patrons require.

### *Negotiating the Brief*

In meeting these parameters, gardenists must anticipate the true character of the patrons' wishes, designing and installing a garden that meets parameters the patrons – supposing they are not garden experts – would have requested had they been knowledgeable enough to do so. This will require that gardenists do not simply accept the brief and move on with the planning. Gardenists must develop the parameters with the patrons, and this occasionally includes saying no or suggesting compromises. A garden patron may wish to grow brightly colored roses under their mature oaks, but the gardenist who plants roses there will not only have not fulfilled the true brief, but that gardenist will have acted unprofessionally as the roses not only will not produce flowers – or not many and not showy ones – but the plant may get sick and die, thereby wasting the patron's resources and killing a living thing that might have lived in a different setting. The parallel with artists working on a commission is similar. A patron or client might ask for something unreasonable – "I would like to be depicted in a Cubist style but I want everyone to recognize that it's me" – and the artist may need to engage in negotiation not only to the result that a reasonable compromise is reached but to the result that the client gets something they will find of optimal value, something they might not have been able to imagine but the artist can.

### *Deciding on the Style*

When gardenists first begin to think about their gardens, they must work within the bounds of the purpose or purposes the resulting garden will serve. Every garden has a central defining purpose or a small set of purposes, and it is important for those appreciating that garden to understand it/them to appreciate that garden appropriately or compare it to others appropriately. Backyard kitchen gardens are very different from botanical gardens; allotment gardens are very different from pleasure gardens (like Longwood in Pennsylvania or Gardens by the Bay in Singapore). The purposes of some gardens – like the residential garden surrounding one's American suburban home – are modest and narrow. The purposes of others – like New York's Central Park – are grand and multifaceted. But even Central Park has a central defining identity: Frederick Law Olmsted and his partner



Calvert Vaux needed to design a metropolitan civic garden that would function as a green oasis for citizens of and visitors to Manhattan. All Central Park's secondary purposes – and there are dozens – fit into the brief of that central purpose. It is with the decision about the purpose that the garden will serve that the decision about the style of the garden is begun. After the purpose is established, the gardenist and the patron may decide on the style of the garden. Throughout the history of gardens going back 4000 years, there are many theories about what a garden should be, and there are many styles that flow from these theories or, in the case where they do not explicitly follow a theory, their formal aspects are unified into a coherent whole, suggesting that there are principles that could be extracted from the garden's formal coherence that would be theory-like. For instance, a patron might want an Arts and Crafts “English cottage garden” style garden, following the nineteenth/early twentieth century British gardenist Gertrude Jekyll. Or they may want a very formal garden, in the “*jardin à la française*” style perfected in the seventeenth century by the principal gardenist of Versailles, André Le Nôtre, with formal flower beds “embroidered” with hedges. Or they may want a garden composed of native plants arranged into a naturalistic meadow, in the early twentieth century style of Danish American Jens Jensen.

### *Interpreting the Style*

Designing a garden that follows a particular style will require that the gardenist interpret that style for the site. This will require the gardenist to account for the size of the land – supposing the garden is placed on land – and its topography, the climate, the soil composition, and what might be available from nurseries that are either close at hand or fit the available resources of the patron. Some garden styles can be reproduced in very small areas – like the Japanese-style *tsubo-niwa* – but others – like the eighteenth-century Capability Brown landscapes created for the English upper-classes – require dozens or even hundreds of acres. Beyond this, the gardenist must avoid a formulaic rendering of the garden style, avoiding designing a garden that is seen to be “derivative,” “unoriginal,” or even plagiaristic. But this is a sword, in garden design, that cuts both ways, as the gardenist, recognizing the investment of resources – time, talent, and treasure – that goes into the creation of a garden (not to mention the fact that the gardenist is working with living components), cannot indulge in large-scale experimentation that jeopardizes the success of the garden.

The gardenist, therefore, must understand the formal markers of the style being pursued, and they must be able to create phenomenal elements that represent those formal markers – yet in a way that is entirely appropriate to the site, the patron's wishes, and their own creativity as a designer. Upon understanding the patron's wishes and the purposes of the gardens they plan, gardenists must develop visions for their gardens, visions of the signature aspects of the various elements that constitute the garden. These elements include the plant palette, of course, but they also include artifactual elements like benches, fountains, and sculptures. Gardenists must ask themselves whether their gardens will be open and spacious or intimate and cozy. They must ask if their gardens will be mostly on a single visual plane or whether one will need to look high in the air as trees lead the eye skyward. They must ask if their gardens will accommodate wildlife, and what kind. And, most importantly of all, they must ask themselves how all the elements their visions include will cohere together to make a unified whole, where the elements do not compete but rather support one another. This is the case with all aesthetic and art creations, and a garden provides an especially rich canvas since its formal elements are many and the various ways available components can be put together to create these elements and create a coherent whole are nearly infinite.

### *Vision of an Imagined Future*

The gardenist typically does not install a garden in its final state but rather must imagine what the mature form of the garden will be, perhaps many years into the future – especially if trees are an integral part of the design – and so a newly installed garden is likely to seem sparse as plants are

spaced out so that as they grow, the garden will become better. It is the experienced artist who creates not just for today but for the potential of appreciation that will last well into the future, perhaps for centuries. Most gardens – in terms of their site-specificity – are meant to be permanent, even though they require regular tending to keep them healthy. As mentioned, part of the reason for such design is that the installation of a garden typically costs a huge amount of money, not to mention the many other resources that go into it. The design of a typical garden holds lessons for those who wish to create aesthetic and art objects they expect to endure, but it provides a unique challenge as the gardenist must envision not a finished product that they will be able to observe and assess but rather they must envision what the mature form of the garden they design today will be — and then what successive “mature forms” of the garden will be as it continues through time, changing in both small and large ways.

### Cooperation

#### *The Limited Plasticity of the Medium*

Beyond the cooperation involved between the gardenist and the patron, gardens centrally require two other sorts of cooperation. First, both gardenists and gardeners – those who maintain gardens after they are initially designed and, while they may work on the installation, typically work with gardens after the initial installation — must cooperate with nature. As mentioned, gardenists who do not plan in accord with nature – with the land, with the climate, with the habits of plants, with natural processes – have gardens that are short-lived. Nature does not accede to good intentions, and no matter how much a gardenist may want roses to grow and flower in deep shade, this is not going to happen.

Some topiaries and some hedges – such as we see bordering the parterres at Versailles — need their shapes maintained every week or even every few days at certain times of the year. Grass grown in shade tends to require more fertilizer than grass grown in sun, and it also tends to require more water as the tree roots beneath the grass take their share of available irrigation. Grass grown in lawns must be mown, and in late spring and summer this can be a weekly chore, requiring time, labor, and the resources to operate lawnmowers. Planted beds where the plants are spread out from one another may require more weeding than densely planted beds – not to mention more mulch, which means that somewhere trees are being harvested for this mulch, significant quantities of which can be expensive and require time and labor to spread appropriately and thickly enough to effect weed control. Cold-sensitive plants may need to be replaced each year in colder climates, or plants may need to be brought into greenhouses (glasshouses, conservatories, orangeries) and then moved back in the late spring. Gardens that rely on annuals require a great deal of intensive planting each spring. High-maintenance gardens are not uncommon – especially in pleasure gardens — but they require more attention, more maintenance, and more resources to stay true to their designs. This entails that if they do not receive these things, they will fade – sometimes quickly — and not be the gardens they were designed to be.

Gardenists who design in greater accord with nature do not face such extreme challenges for the longevity of their gardens, and they do not impose so much obligation and work on the gardeners who must maintain the gardens. Yet, the most “nature-friendly” gardens may not appeal to visitors in the ways that gardens with more obvious “aesthetic-forward” designs may. A garden that does not exhibit its design may not be read as much of a garden at all, and that might defeat the purpose of creating a garden in the first place. An unattractive garden might not enjoy the sort of attention that leads to sustained investment of resources in that garden.<sup>8</sup>

Gardenists and gardeners alike, in designing and maintaining gardens, are partners with nature, and the media with which they work – typically inclusive of living plants, typically outdoors – are not as plastic as the media of paint-and-canvas or another medium that is not as dynamic as nature. While one may argue that an artist has more control in executing their vision in a more plastic, more

malleable, medium, it can be as easily argued that there is greater challenge in mastering a less plastic medium. This level of challenge leads to the acquisition of a great range and depth of skill – not merely technical skill but artistic skill as well.

#### *Cooperation with Other Gardenists and Gardeners*

In addition to cooperating with nature, gardenists and gardeners must cooperate with each other and with visitors. Some of the greatest gardenists – Musô Soseki, André Le Nôtre, Capability Brown, William Kent, Gertrude Jekyll, Vita Sackville-West, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jens Jensen, Roberto Burle Marx, Piet Oudolf – stand alone, or, when they work with others, those others follow the visions of these gardenist masters. But this is not typically the case. Many landscape design or landscape architecture firms are composed of groups of gardenists who oftentimes collaborate with one another on a design. Cooperation with others is even more prevalent when it comes to gardeners. A sizeable garden – the size of any destination garden, including botanical gardens – will have a team of gardeners, and while a particular horticulturist typically will oversee a certain area or a certain collection, gardens are fluid across the entirety of the space they occupy, and so these horticulturists will need to work with each other to maintain the whole of the garden complex optimally. In addition, gardens typically outlive the time in which one gardener works them. One gardener will be followed by another, and then another, for the lifespan of a garden, and while overlap is not required, the gardener who does not consider how successive gardeners will find the gardens they leave behind will develop a reputation for being uncooperative.

#### *Cooperation with Audiences*

Gardeners must also cooperate with visitors. This can be challenging when a particular visitor does not grasp the rules of garden-visiting, perhaps asking a gardener if they can take cuttings or pick flowers. But, in general, gardeners function in some measure as educators when they are in destination gardens – especially in botanical gardens – and, again in general, gardeners welcome the thoughtful questions of visitors about the plants in a collection or questions that both demonstrate an interest in gardens and gardening and are sophisticated enough to show that the questioner is careful not to waste the time of the gardener. Questions such as “what should I grow in my garden?” are best left for those working at nurseries, but questions such as “how often does this plant in your collection flower?” are great.

#### **Curation and Editing**

Sculptors who work in wood or stone typically remove material in the creation of their works. Gardeners, of course, typically spend most of their time “editing” the plants growing in their gardens, removing weeds and errant seedlings, pruning errant limbs and diseased parts of plants, removing plants when they are at the end of their lifespans or are threatening the lives or health of nearby plants, deadheading spent flowers, and the like.

#### *The Non-Blank Slate*

There are in the history of horticulture some gardenists who famously work only with blank slates, preferring to craft their gardens even more deeply than “from the ground up.” Capability Brown has an extreme reputation in this regard. He was known to remove all traces of former gardens – typically earlier baroque gardens – and then reshape the land, adding significant water features (lakes that resembled rivers) and recreating a topography that would accommodate his intensive and highly recognizable designs. But many gardenists do not insist on starting with blank slates. They prefer to work instead with what already exists on a site. From an environmentally sustainable point of view, this approach is the better. If the land upon which a garden is to be installed already has a river or lake, that water feature is incorporated into the design, as are large boulders, mature trees

and plants that are valuable to both the gardenist and the patron. Sometimes components like boulders will be moved from one place to another. One of the best examples of working with what is present is New York's High Line garden, the principal vision and design of which is credited to gardenist Piet Oudolf. The High Line is an elevated garden, of just less than a mile and half, built on a platform of abandoned railway tracks on New York's West Side. The walk's history as a railway is obvious; Oudolf and his associates made no attempt to hide this. Instead, they worked with it to create something that attracts several million visitors annually. While many artists work with blank slates – blank canvases, blank paper (or computer screens), empty stages – the artist who curates and edits what is already present may learn the patience, cooperation, and spirit of sustainability from thinking about how these activities are practiced by gardenists and gardeners.

### *Starting Small*

An experienced gardener will make a series of small pruning cuts over time, not only as a way not to stress the plant being pruned, but also to acquire confidence that their “edits” are ones that will enhance both the health and the aesthetic dimensions of the plant. This practice takes great patience, as the successive states of the plant being pruned do not show the completed project but rather only one stage in it. This single stage may make the plant look lopsided, and this can be a source of frustration to a gardener whose work is steered by aesthetic concerns. The patience required is similar to the patience required of the artist who develops their work slowly, even as the pace includes stages where the object or event being molded seems either to have strayed from the artistic vision or seems to have acquired negative qualities that seem contrary to the vision for the finished work. Yet the experienced gardener and the experienced artist know that the path is not the destination, and a slow and steady pace may very likely result in a product of greater quality than if the gardener/artist rushes to instantiate their vision.

### *A Clear Vision of the Goal*

Only the artist who has a clear idea of what the ideal of the finished project is can exercise this level of patience without anxiety. This is clearly the case in the garden, as gardenists typically install immature versions of the gardens they design and envision, relying on nature and the gardeners who follow them to shape what is initially installed into the mature form that lives as an idea in the mind of the designer. Yet, both the artist and the gardener must be able to decide, on occasion, whether a “happy accident” is worth retaining or not. This level of flexibility depends on that clear vision of the goal, and occasionally a happy accident will be something an artist or gardener sees as contributory to that vision – and occasionally flexibility means that the goal and the vision leading to it change and adapt. Yet, without a clear vision of the goal, neither the artist nor the gardener can properly assess whether a happy accident is indeed worth retaining or indeed worth adjusting the vision for the project. Without a clear vision, there is no principled path forward.

### *Acting on Assessments*

No garden is perfect, at least not for very long. Occasionally gardeners who have just finished weeding, pruning, and installing new plants and new mulch, may survey their gardens and take pride in the garden being perfect. Yet, a week later, the hedges have lost their crisp edges, the lawns need to be mown, and some particularly virulent weeds may have popped up from beneath the mulch. So, the gardener goes back to work, and perhaps after a full day's effort will survey the garden to see that it is once again perfect. But another week goes by, and – in the growing seasons – the cycle starts up all over again.

Gardeners have conceptions of what their perfect gardens look (sound, smell, feel) like. They must have these visions, or they would not be able to set goals for their efforts. They must be able to see what is wrong, and they must know how to fix those things – to whatever the limits of their resources,

their abilities, and nature will allow. And these visions must evolve. A gardener cannot have taken a photograph of their perfect garden and each spring (in the northern hemisphere) work to recreate the garden in that image. Gardens do not work that way. Instead, the gardener must create a new imagined vision of what the perfect state would be of the garden before them, and they must do this not only every year but typically every season – or at least in all those seasons when gardening is possible. The perfect state of a spring garden is likely to be different from the perfect state of the summer garden.

### *Guidance*

The experienced gardener has the security and boldness to seek out the advice and critique of fellow gardeners, who may offer suggestions for what to add, what to delete, what to move, what to reshape, and so forth. Hearing the critiques of others may be tough for gardeners who baby their gardens, but outside assessments can be very useful as gardening is such a constant endeavor that it is easy to develop a sort of tunnel vision on what one thinks needs to be done. A fresh set of eyes may mean new suggestions for plants gardeners may not have thought about on their own, and these new additions might enliven the garden and renew the gardener's enthusiasm for investing time, attention, effort, and enduring the pains – sore muscles, bug bites, sunburn – that inevitably come from gardening.

An artist must develop, first, the courage to seek out critique of their work; second, the thickness of skin to truly hear that critique, a skill that takes time and practice as the product of one's creative efforts is usually an object into which one has a good deal of emotional investment; and, third, the strength to make changes based on those aspects of the critique that the artist has decided – rationally and dispassionately – will result in a better product. These are not easy things. The artist can benefit from being a student of the garden, as the ongoing character of bringing a garden to an admirable state quickly erodes and must be re-envisioned and re-created again and again. They must be able to self-critique, to critique the state of their garden, and to be open to hearing the suggestions of others.

### *Experimentation*

Typically, a painter working in oil has more flexibility than a painter working in acrylics, and so the oil painter may be more willing to take some risks, to try out some things, more than the acrylic painter might. Being willing to take risks can lead to artistic insights and to better finished products. A musical composer or a novelist has the option of using a pencil rather than a pen – of course, today, we all use computers, and the backspace and delete keys are readily available. In a garden, experimentation is not merely a sometime-decision, it is rather the normal state of what tending a garden amounts to. Gardeners are forced to experiment – with methods, with actions, with new technologies, with new plants, new fertilizers, new pesticides. And this makes them open to greater experimentation – perhaps with hybrids and with new garden styles. Every experiment must then be assessed, and decisions must be made about whether to continue with an experiment, alter it, or scrap it. The frequency of experimentation in a garden leads to a frequency of assessment, and this development of a culture of iterative critique leads to better gardens – and to better works of art for the artist who practices something similar.

### **Surrendering Control**

The oldest extant garden in the world is likely the ancient Mahamevnâwa Gardens in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, which were founded sometime before 307 BCE. The gardens contain a tree that is widely accepted to be from a cutting of the original Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. Over the course of the last two millennia, the Mahamevnâwa Gardens have been under the care of many different gardeners. Each one, in turn, has had at some point to say goodbye to the Gardens and leave their care in the hands of successive gardeners. A garden complex

that is 2300 years old has had many who have tended it, and given that it continues to this day, the pattern of success as one gardener hands off the work to the next is not only astounding but suggests that entrusting future generations of gardeners is something that can be done – at least in this context – with a good deal of confidence.

It is possible for a garden to be in the hands of a single gardenist-turned-gardener for its full lifespan. This is the sort of thing that happens at London's Chelsea Flower Show each May. Given that during the week of an entry's existence it is subject to all the sorts of gardening practices any longer-lived garden typically is, and given that the plots are what one might find in an allotment or community garden, it seems uncontroversial to refer to these sorts of objects as gardens, despite their temporary character. But the gardens at the Chelsea Flower Show are exceptional because they are so temporary. The Mahamevnawa Gardens are equally – well, actually much more – exceptional. The typical lifespan of a garden lies somewhere in between, and this implies that there will be hand-offs of responsibility gardener-to-gardener during the lifespan of a garden. There likely will be such hand-offs among different parties who own or control the gardens; there may be changes to the defining purposes of gardens; and there may be successive gardens occupying the same plot of land.

A gardener who works a garden may work that garden for a period of time that dwarfs the amount put into the creation of a different sort of object, and so with the added investment of time and attention can come greater attachment. This level of attachment can be even deeper when the objects of that attachment are living things, plants the gardener may have nurtured for years. Yet, as we saw earlier, most gardens live beyond single gardeners, and so the gardener will have to face the day when the garden is no longer theirs, and its care must be entrusted to another.

### Ongoing Creativity

Works of art from canonical or traditional artforms usually reach a point where they are complete and not subject to further modification. This is typical of paintings and sculptures. It has become slightly less typical with film, as we have seen George Lucas and Steven Spielberg introduce changes to some of their iconic films as either new technologies have allowed them to create sequences that more closely match their original visions – not possible with the technology available at the time of original creation – or as sensibilities have changed concerning what is appropriate and what is not. An example of the latter occurs in Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, where the instruments held by agents looking for a set of children are changed from guns to walkie-talkies. Dance admits of more change than most artforms, and improvisational music and performance does not have such limits. But, in general, traditional works of art – those objects where temporality is not a relevant aesthetic feature – as we find in paintings and sculptures – or where the work is temporally bound – as we find in film, literature, and many performances – reach a point where they are complete, and modification is no longer an option.

Yet this injunction against modification, once the artist pronounces that a work is finished, makes no sense in the garden. Every gardener is a co-gardenist, as every garden, during its lifespan, must be “revised” and redesigned in response to the changes that garden has experienced as it matures. As gardens mature, the aim may only be to keep the guiding vision and defining purposes of the garden intact and to keep the original design “more or less” intact as that design will speak to the coherence of its various elements. But in most cases gardeners must take on the role of co-gardenist, redesigning aspects as shade is introduced by growing plants, as plants crowd one another, and as the effects of climate change alter what can and cannot be grown in a particular garden.

But we can think about ongoing creativity in a garden in more “local” terms. Every time gardeners engage in gardening practices, they engage in creative activity. Even if their actions are responses to matters like disease, the actions they take have aesthetic dimensions. If, for instance, a branch is diseased and must be removed, few gardeners will simply chop off the branch and be done. Most will endeavor to reshape the plant so that the loss of the branch does not make the plant seem



lopsided or unbalanced. Even when deadheading spent-flowers will not contribute to the production of new ones, gardeners may still deadhead plants simply because they look better that way. A gardener who decides that a morning will be devoted to weeding and is disciplined enough to stick to the weeding is rare; it is more common to see a range of items that need attention as one weeds. The “seeing” is an aesthetic activity, of course, and then doing something about those items is another.

Gardening provides a context through the ongoing creativity that is instantiated in common gardening practices for the practices described above to be reinforced again and again. The stakes here are *high* in the sense that lives – those of the plants and the various animals that might inhabit a garden – are at risk, in the sense that a garden not properly attended can fade quickly, in the sense that the resources required by gardens are sometimes intense, and in the sense that the garden may not be one’s own and so there is an obligation to another person or persons to get the job done right. At the same time, the stakes here are *low* in the sense that a mistake does not mean a piece of Carrara marble has been wasted or anything of that sort, in the sense that plants grow back and so less-than-perfect pruning is not a forever-mistake, in the sense that gardens are typically so complex that an accidental “manslaughter” of a plant – say through over fertilizing or over watering – is not the end of the world, and in the sense that typically one is part of a team of gardeners, all of whom are cooperating together on a common goal, even though that goal must be reset every week or month or so. But we might say it another way: *because* aesthetic goals must be reset periodically, a garden presents a near perfect opportunity to practice one’s artistic and aesthetic skills over and over, normally until one hands the gardening baton to the next gardener.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mara Miller, *The Garden as an Art* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Ross, *What Gardens Mean* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> David Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> David Fenner and Ethan Fenner, *The Art and Philosophy of the Garden* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2024), chapters one and two.

<sup>5</sup> David Cooper, “In Praise of Gardens,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43:2 (2003), p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> The term “landscape architect” was first introduced in 1862 by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the designers of, among many other civic gardens, New York City’s Central Park. See also Roger Paden, “The Ethical Function of Landscape Architecture,” *Environmental Philosophy* 15:2 (2018), p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Such as is the focus of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

<sup>8</sup> Yuriko Saito, “Ecological Design: Promises and Challenges,” *Environmental Ethics* 24:3 (2002), pp. 243–261.

# Anesthetic Criticism and the Economy of Lifedeath: The *Odyssey* and the Akedah

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A. SAMUEL KIMBALL

**Abstract:** The hermeneutic principles of the *Odyssey* and the narrative of Abraham and Isaac—the texts from which Auerbach derives *the* representational program of western literature—illustrate how the aesthetic harbors an anesthetizing power that is ineliminable from human existence, hence from human perception, cognition, and affect. A criticism attentive to the anesthetic deepens the understanding of the evolutionary economy—an economy of lifedeath—within which our species, our cognition, and the products of our cognition have emerged, their adaptive value inherently unable to ensure our survival into the possible futures, which we cannot know we are setting in motion.

**Keywords:** anesthetics, economy, lifedeath, *Odyssey*, Akedah

“Politics and political economy . . . are implicated in every discourse on art and on the beautiful.”

—Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” 3.

“Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead being, and a very rare type.”

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 3, §109.

“To lose itself all by itself, to go down on its own, to autoimmunize itself, as I would prefer to say in order to designate this strange illogical logic by which a living being can spontaneously destroy, in an autonomous fashion, the very thing within it that is supposed to protect it against the other, to immunize it against the aggressive intrusion of the other.”

—Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, 123.

## 1. Introduction

By anesthetic criticism I mean a meta-hermeneutic investigation of hermeneutics in a world in which *existence costs*—that is, in which the difference between gain and loss, indebtedness and freedom from the past, life and death is necessarily and inescapably undecidable in relation to the unknown future that any decision in the present might inaugurate; and therefore also in relation to the infinitude of possible futures that are absolutely lost by virtue of any decision, which instantly entails the loss of this lost.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, by anesthetic criticism I mean a critical inspection of those interpretive programs that rationalize the violence that is inextricable from the evolutionary success of *Homo sapiens*; to that end that presuppose and privilege the capacity of human consciousness to unify and harmonize the diversity of its activities—economic, political, ethical, religious, artistic, and so on—without sufficiently acknowledging, or acknowledging at all, the inevitable costliness of this capacity, or by presuming that they can convert the violence of these costs into



determinable gains with minimal or no determinable loss; and that thereby aestheticize humankind's reflexivity while failing to account for the anesthetizing power of such idealization.<sup>2</sup>

Why would our species have evolved a consciousness that is prone to anesthetizing itself, and to doing so by concealing its awareness of its self-numbing within what is felt to be its consciousness-intensifying aesthetic productions? Having supplanted all other species in the *Homo* genus, humankind has long been a menace to itself; indeed, in our dependency on one another, and therefore in our susceptibility to betrayal by our own kind, "we," who are paradoxically not yet what this pronoun appears to signify, are at risk of destroying and being destroyed by those *we* regard as *not us* yet who perceive *us* likewise as *not the us* that they take themselves to be.<sup>3</sup>

My argument is not that the aesthetic *is* a ruse of a false or self-falsifying consciousness, not that it *is* a psychological defense, not that it *is* truth relativizing, for any such totalizing declarative predication would be self-contradictory insofar as it would tacitly exclude itself from its claim even as the claim would nevertheless include it. Rather, my argument is that the aesthetic harbors an anesthetizing power that is ineliminable from human existence, hence from human perception, cognition, and affect. In other words, the anesthetic is inseparable from the aesthetic—essential to and yet threatening of it, neither term designating the opposability that it seems to name.<sup>4</sup>

I shall support this argument by analyzing how the hermeneutic principles of the *Odyssey* and the narrative of Abraham and Isaac—the texts from which Erich Auerbach famously derives the fundamental representational program of western literature—encode the force of the anesthetic within its aesthetic protocols. I believe that a criticism attentive to the anesthetic deepens the understanding of the evolutionary economy—as an economy not of life but of lifedeath—within which our species, our cognition, and the products of our cognition, have emerged presumably because of their adaptive value, such value being inherently unable to ensure our survival into the possible futures, which we cannot know in any given present moment of awareness that we are setting in motion.

## 2. Poetic Justice: Odysseus's Revenge (An)esthetically Sanctified

In his canonical study *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach begins by contrasting two stylistic programs that have recurred throughout the history of "the representation of reality in western literature," in the words of his subtitle. One is typified by the *Odyssey*—by "the *need* of the Homeric style to leave nothing which it mentions half in darkness and unexternalized" (5; my emphasis). Auerbach does not locate this "need" in Homer's entreaty that the Muse "Sing in me . . . and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending . . ." (*Odyssey*, ll. 1–2). Nor does he derive this "need" from the content of this story—neither from the actions of Odysseus (he raids and plunders on his way back to Ithaka where, of course, he slaughters the suitors, the brothers and sons of the people over which he rules as king), nor from his character. Why is it, then, that "the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present"? (Auerbach 7). The reason why Auerbach declares that "the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret meaning" (13), is that every aspect of the hero's journey back to his island kingdom of Ithaka to reunite with his family takes place in the Zeus-ordained and foregrounded moral ordering of the cosmos, which this Father-god announces in his "bright hall . . . upon Olympus," divine counterpart to Odysseus's house, where "the other gods were all at home,"<sup>5</sup> when he summarizes his law of crime and punishment: "See how Aigisthos [the lover and co-conspirator of Clytemnestra] . . . stole Agamemnon's wife and killed the soldier on his homecoming day. And yet Aigisthos knew that his own doom lay in this. We gods had warned him. . . . Now he has paid the reckoning in full" (1: 52–62). Here, in full view and hearing of all the Olympian gods—the scene rendered in the epic's characteristic style of "fully externalized description, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, displaying unmistakable meanings . . ." (Auerbach, 23)—Zeus anticipates and justifies the terrible penalty that Odysseus will deliver to the suitors in the "halls" (21: 133, 22: 535) of his own home. And yet it is just this foreshadowing judgment that Zeus

repudiates in the final lines of the poem when, without explanation, he not only imposes a limit to the revenge he will permit Odysseus to exact from the Suitors but also rhetorically all but erases the hero, thereby revealing what up until this moment has been anesthesically concealed as an aestheticizing moral idealization of Odysseus. How so?

Elsewhere, I have explained in detail how Odysseus is repeatedly associated with the god-signs of Zeus.<sup>6</sup> When Athena beseeches Zeus to allow Odysseus to finally return home, Zeus himself says of “that kingly man” that “there is no mortal half so wise; no mortal gave so much to the lords of open sky” (1.87–88). Accordingly, in her various guises Athena assures Odysseus that Zeus has accepted his unstinting sacrifices and the righteousness of his fury against the Suitors. Not, however, at the epic’s very end. At the climax of the battle against the brothers, sons, and allies of the slain Suitors, Odysseus is so enraged that he and Telemakos “would have cut the enemy down to the last man, leaving not one survivor had not Athena raised a shout that stopped all fighters in their tracks” and commanded them to “end your bloodshed, Ithakans, and make peace” (24: 588–593). The designation “Ithakans” names everyone, of course, including Odysseus. However, unlike his enemies, who are terrified at “the great voice of the goddess” (24: 597) and who turn and flee for their lives, Odysseus is all the more incited: he lets out “a cry to freeze their hearts, and ruffling like an eagle on the pounce . . . reared himself to follow,” the completion of his vengeance likened to an act of avian—non-human—predation, which the previous instance of this simile sanctifies as sent by the Olympian god of gods. It is at just this moment, however, that Zeus himself intervenes, “dropp[ing] his thunderbolt smoking at his daughter’s feet” (24: 602–603). Why at Athena’s feet and not at the hero’s? Why does the Father-god threaten his daughter with a force that directly hitting Odysseus would have obliterated him, and why in full view of Odysseus? The answer discloses the anesthetic function of the poem’s mythic form as a heroic quest to re-found the communal basis of Ithakan society, which, after twenty years of being leaderless, is on the verge of a suicidal war with itself. Rather than reestablish a kingdom-wide peace, cooperation, and commitment to the common good, however, Odysseus is about to decimate the social order in the name of his desire for “full payment,” until this moment the thematic heart of the tale and the representational goal of its signature style. If, after 12,000 lines of supporting Odysseus’s vengeance, Zeus stops the homecoming king’s reckoning, if he now inexplicably arrests Odysseus at the peak of his rage, if he now fully isolates the Ithakan ruler in the instant of his most intense savagery, it is because the poem reinterprets itself through a new conception of Zeus—of his justice and its economy. And so it is that, in order not to kill Odysseus, Zeus forces him to surrender who he has been, to exchange his polytropic resourcefulness<sup>7</sup> in the service of what has appeared to be heroic retribution for becoming an unnamed signatory, one of two “parties,” any difference between Odysseus and the other Ithakans now erased, to “terms of peace.”

When Auerbach claims that “Homer can be analyzed . . . but he cannot be interpreted” (Auerbach, 13), he misses the secret that the *Odyssey* keeps from itself, aided and abetted by a tradition of commentary that has not recognized the infanticidal meaning of the decimation that Odysseus visits upon the Suitors, and of the like obliteration that Zeus stops himself from unleashing upon his daughter as well as the one whose vengeance the poem has previously divinized. Only in its final lines does the epic begin to awaken from the anesthetizing aestheticization of the hero’s violence.

In this interpretation, the end of the Book 24 provides a privileged perspective from which to examine the anesthetic features of the Homeric style in action. I have previously traced how these features, without specifying them as anesthetizing, encode the infanticidal meaning of Odysseus’s name and his actions throughout the epic.<sup>8</sup> Here, I want to look briefly at how the poem explicitly aestheticizes this violence just before the hero mows down<sup>9</sup> the Suitors only to have his military victory, the future he had imagined would come from it, and his idealization of his vengeance interrupted and repudiated by Zeus.

In Book 21, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, has revealed himself to his faithful wife, who keeps the secret of his identity and his plans for executing his revenge against the Suitors. Following his

instruction, she retrieves his bow from storage, her Athena-prompted self-talk externalized: “Now try those dogs at archery,” she says to herself, “to usher bloody slaughter in” (21.4–5). She is furious, for the Suitors have violated the foundational principle of Greek sociality—the reciprocal obligations of guests and hosts—by feasting at the expense of the king’s household and neglecting the ritual of sacrificial meat offerings to the gods. However, before continuing with what happens next in the chronology of events—the battle during which Odysseus, his son, his father, and his loyal servants destroy the Suitors—the narrative pauses the action to explain the violent, indeed infanticidal, history of the bow. It does so according to the epic’s aesthetic principle of compositional foregrounding—interrupting chronology to leave nothing unexplained in an unilluminated background.

The history of the bow centers on an unpaid debt of 300 sheep and their shepherds, stolen from Ithaka by Messenians “in the old time” (21: 14). At some point the Ithakan elders, along with Odysseus’s father, send Odysseus to collect what they are owed. When Odysseus arrives in Pherai, he meets and befriends Iphitos, himself on a similar mission to recover 12 mares and their mule colts. Iphitos is an archer son of Eurytos, also an archer. When Odysseus leaves, Iphitos gives his now symbolic brother the bow his dying father had given him. “In fellowship Odysseus gave a lance and a sharp sword. But Herakles killed Iphitos before one friend could play host to the other” (21.35–37). To honor the memory of Iphitos, Odysseus does not take the bow to the war at Troy but safeguards this hunting and military weapon, now redesignated as a peaceable “keepsake,” where “it served him well at home in Ithaka” (21.40–41). Just how this token of friendship has “served” Odysseus is never disclosed. How it will serve him is about to be, for when the narrative returns to the present action, the bow, transferred from father to son and son to guest, will become the means by which a deferred and displaced revenge in the name of a multiple filial imperative—friend avenging his friend and thus restituting the honor of the murdered friend’s patrilineage—is finally accomplished, its destiny fulfilled. When Penelope retrieves this gift from storage, where it has been as if hidden and unused, she presages how Odysseus, bow in hand, prepares to emerge from his hiding as a beggar to claim his identity and to settle not only his own accounts but those associated with the history of the bow, these to be retrospectively sacralized by the restoration of Odysseus’s kingship.

The bow, however, is not simply Odysseus’s possession. Although it is an extension of Odysseus—of his training as a hunter and warrior, of his plundering, and of his vengeance against the Suitors—it is also the case that he is an extension of the bow and its meaning as a signifier (specifically a synecdoche) of the ancient Greek world’s symbolic order and its vulnerability to the auto-immunitary risk that its sacralization of vengeance produces and rationalizes as retributive justice. The risk in question is inseparable from the economy of reciprocal obligations, which requires peace-respecting observance of the guest–host relation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, vengeance against anyone who is perceived to have compromised or to be presently traducing this relation, even when the very act of retribution is categorically indistinguishable from the trespass, crime, or debt that motivates it.

From the outset, the Homeric narrative conceals this similitude if not identity of retributive justice and the malefaction it reproduces. In the opening two books, for example, the difference between the revenge that Odysseus seeks and the apparent profanity of the Suitors is not a straightforward matter of principle (the noble family of an exceptional warrior versus the execrable kinsmen who have besmirched the guest–host protocols) but of military force, the lethality and societal destructiveness of which, as noted above, Zeus does not interdict until the very end when he withdraws his sacralizing authorization of Athena’s support for Odysseus’s vengeance. Indeed, in the first two books, the narrative hints at but does not otherwise address the implications of the collective anxiety and rivalry that have overtaken the kingdom as well as Odysseus’s own household as a result of the king’s twenty-year absence and the danger but also the opportunity that his death announces. If, as Telemakhos acknowledges, his father likely has not survived, this son is at risk of losing his inheritance as well as the kingship should his mother, the queen, remarry. For her part Penelope has

for three years pretended that she believes her husband has died, declaring to all of Ithaka that she will choose one of the Suitors after she finishes weaving a funeral shroud for her still-living father-in-law. When the Suitors discover her deception, the narrative notes their grievance against the queen but includes nothing about the legitimacy of their anger at the queen herself for having made a false promise. Instead, the narrative turns to and affirms the helpless rage of Telemakhos at how the Suitors have desecrated the guest-host relation, “squandering” and “plundering” its “treasure and livestock” (2.62, 69, and 80–81), which he has expected to inherit. The narrative is likewise silent about how Penelope’s “cunning” has put her son in a precarious bind: too young and inexperienced to handle the Suitors, he must nevertheless protect the household from the conflict between the palace and the Ithakans, a conflict his mother has intensified by declaring her widowhood and thus announcing her availability to those who seek her hand and the throne, as they must in order to secure the succession that the island kingdom needs. Idealization, sacralization, aestheticization, rationalization, justification—all are names for the anesthetic effect of the Homeric poetic vision. All are forms of the stylistic techniques by which the narrative represents the force of the hero as divinely sanctioned, the hero’s furious assault on his own people as retributive justice, and his quest for total victory over his enemies as the will of the god of gods.

The gift of the bow embodies this anesthesia and simultaneously veils this embodiment by representing it in language that links its aesthetic qualities to the ethical meaning of its use, thereby attempting to idealize and transcendentalize the ideology of vengeance.

The use of the bow—the use that Iphitos and then Odysseus make of it and the use that the bow makes of the two friends, joining them in a bond of friendship that becomes a posthumous military alliance—is both the cause and the consequence of the crisis of the Girardian reciprocal violence<sup>10</sup> that results from this double use. In the *Odyssey*’s human-generated societal disaster, what has previously bound the Ithakans in common—trust, friendship, courtship and marriage, honor, observance of the protocols governing and safeguarding the guest-host relation, scrupulous performance of the rituals due the gods, and so on—has disintegrated. The divided community has found itself in interpretive conflict, each side so inflamed in its grievances against the other that in their desire to get even they are indistinguishable, their differences subsumed by their identical aim to emerge victorious at the cost of the lives of their once friends, now enemies.

The Homeric narrative, however, insists on siding with Odysseus, at least until the surprise of its final lines, when Zeus checks himself from obliterating Odysseus—that is, when Zeus transforms his signature power of death into a sign of the accord that neither Odysseus nor his Ithakan opponents can achieve on their own. Until then, the narrative attempts to distinguish Odysseus (as heroic son, father, husband, and king) from the Suitors (as defilers of what has previously been the city-state’s community-binding customs) by assigning to its presumptive hero a weapon that has been sanctified and hence transcendently aestheticized while withholding any such consecration of the like weaponry of those he slaughters, whose swords and bows, like the suitors themselves, are depicted as ineffectual in saving them from the consequences of having profaned Odysseus’s home.

And yet this idealization of the gift of the bow is precarious. On the one hand, the narrative imbues Odysseus’s bow—the bow itself, the history of the bow, and the giving of it—with the highest and purest of values. On the other hand, however, fidelity to this gift indebts the one who is given it—indebts the recipient to the past as the blessing of a friendship that at the time of the giving is a contract of peace. Given in trust, the bow is not what it literally is—a means of killing—but a symbol of the life safeguarded by the reciprocal “fellowship” of metaphorical brothers (21.35). In the *Odyssey*, this principle invests revenge, in the name of the friend who has been killed by enemies, with the meaning of preserving the friend’s memory, the friend’s symbolic life, a meaning implicit in the initial gift. When he uses the bow to kill the Suitors, however, Odysseus reveals the bow’s symbolic power as a curse—the curse that is intrinsic to the structure of an accord that makes revenge obligatory, since every such act is always at risk of eliciting a further act of revenge in response, identically

a curse perceived as a sacred duty. The entire aesthetic program of the Homeric style is to justify, self-contradictorily, the sacralization of Odysseus's revenge but not that of the Suitors and their allies, on the one hand, and yet, on the other hand, revenge as such as an expression of his world's social-cum-religious ideology. That is why the epic must protect itself from recognizing the meaning of the peace accord that Zeus decrees all sides must sign—that revenge implicates hero and enemy in the same mystification of their shared sacrificial orientation.

No wonder, then, that “the man skilled in all ways of contending” (21.460) mirrors the Homeric narrative's ultimate skill—sacralizing his weapon as an aesthetic instrument. Thus it is that when Odysseus “effortlessly . . . strung the bow, then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it, so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang a swallow's note” (21.466–470). The Suitors momentarily silenced, “Zeus thundered overhead, one loud crack for a sign” (21.471–472). Thereafter Odysseus shoots his arrow through twenty-four socket rings—they have been set up as a test among the Suitors, the winner to wed Penelope—as if his unerring aim were the Zeus's signal for the song of slaughter begin.<sup>11</sup> At this moment of triumph, Odysseus has no inkling that the next thundering sign from Zeus will bear a far different meaning about the nature of his desire.

No wonder, too, that the epic does not broach the reason for the advent of a new kind of meaning to Zeus's signals. No such inquiry, let alone explanatory engagement, is imaginable from within the epic—only a narrated declaration of the bare fact of Zeus's irresistible but unaccounted for self-manifestation, fully externalized, interrupting the action to announce *that* there must and will be a peace beyond the satisfaction of the desire to get even. And yet the ending thereby inscribes the decisive force of Zeus's command to stop fighting within the epic's indication of a potentially transformative apprehension, which its identification with Odysseus conceals in the open: those who sacralize their quest for revenge—everyone in the poem—remain enclosed in a profane order, rationalizing and aestheticizing their violence as the means of instituting what they mistakenly believe to be the justice of the Father-god, hence as this very justice; and therefore likewise remain anesthetically unable to recognize the absolute cost and irremediable loss, hence the inescapable injustice, of this supposed justice. It is a blindness to injustice that Zeus wishes Odysseus to see in the death that the lightning bolt does not deliver: hurled at Athena's feet, the flashing force of Zeus protects the hero from an extinction this mortal does not know is the meaning of his vengeance.

The injustice of justice is a provisional name for the evolutionary economy as an economy of lifedeath. Unlike the *Odyssey*, which is unable to countenance this economy until its final lines, the entirety of the narrative that embodies the second Auerbachian mode of mimesis, the second aesthetic style—the account of Abraham's “binding” of his son, the Akedah, in preparation to sacrifice him as God has commanded—dramatizes this economy with a directness so appalling that it has provoked in reaction an entire tradition of self-protective, self-idealizing, and self-anesthetizing commentary.

### 3. As the Smoke Rises from the Altar: The Threat that No Generational Blessing Can Economize

In contrast to the *Odyssey*'s mimesis, the Old Testament's representation of reality entails “entirely different ways of developing conflict.” In its stories “the peace of daily life in the house, in the fields, and among the flocks, is undermined by jealousy over election and the promise of a blessing, and complications arise which would be utterly incomprehensible to the Homeric heroes. The latter must have palpable and clearly expressible reasons for their conflicts and enmities, and these work themselves out in free battles; whereas, with the former, the perpetually smouldering jealousy and the connection between the domestic and the spiritual, between the paternal blessing and the divine blessing, lead to daily life being permeated with the stuff of conflict, often with poison” (Auerbach 22). Such conflict remains mythological in Homer but “universal-historical” in the Bible (Auerbach 23). The Homeric crisis of kingdom-riving violence is summarily resolved by the direct interven-



tion of Zeus, whose “terms of peace” designate nothing of how the Ithakans achieve a cessation of their civil war, nothing of how they negotiate their past grievances, and thus nothing about the future of their kingdom. Not so in the Old Testament, “the religious intent” of which “involves an absolute claim to historical truth” (Auerbach 14). The conflicts it describes are events the repercussions of which affect the present and will reverberate in a future that, belief in its eschatological trajectory notwithstanding, remains deeply uncertain, problematic, anxiety arousing, and demanding of interpretation, the very need for which is in tension with the surety of its covenantal promise.

Although he does not analyze this tension, Auerbach implicitly locates it in the manner of the Akedah’s narration—in the way the story of Abraham’s obedience to God’s harrowing call to sacrifice his son makes use of a range of culturally foundational stylistic features that delimit a contrasting mimetic program to that of the *Odyssey* and that express an apprehension Homer does not have about the economy of human life. In Homer, the future that Odysseus seeks is a return to a previous time, the return coinciding with the seeming completion of a revenge that, acknowledged by no one in the epic, harbors the surprise of always being able to ignite the same desire to get even in turn. Until Zeus intercedes at the end to stop this baleful repetition, the kingdom is imprisoned in the reciprocal hatred that closes off everyone alike from an emotional transformation of which they cannot conceive. Paradoxically, the ideology of revenge anesthetizes the world of the *Odyssey*, whose iconic poet aestheticizes heroic violence. When Zeus finally intervenes, this world has a chance to imagine a new affective basis for peace. The poem names but does not develop the opportunity it introduces. Homer’s Zeus offers no promise of what is to come with peace nor any indication of how it is that the Greeks can achieve it. In sharp contrast, the future anticipated throughout the Old Testament is not a time when one avenger will defeat another once and for all, when one party feels justified in their vengeance by the ruin of their enemy, the perspective of the enemy dismissed. Rather, the future is the transcendental telos of the “the last Days, the fulfilling of the Covenant, with which the world will come to an end,” before which “everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence” by the difficult and rigorous work of interpretation, which is inescapably provisional because subject to the necessary revisions that new, unanticipated, or unimaginable turns of events call for. These developments, by which the future is initially perceived as disturbing or even breaking with the projected salvific trajectory of the Covenant, “must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan,” the “fitting” resulting in a complex history of hermeneutic endeavors (Auerbach 16). As Auerbach goes on to explain, “the claim of the Old Testament stories to represent universal history, their insistent relation—a relation constantly redefined by conflict—to a single and hidden God, who yet shows himself and who guides universal history by promise and exaction, gives these stories an entirely different perspective from any the Homeric poems can possess” (Auerbach 16–17). That perspective is conveyed stylistically by a manner of presentation devoid of detail about the physical world other than what is necessary to situate the psychological orientations, moral circumstances, and spiritual challenges of those named, the mimetic purposes that this style serves. Apart from its exceedingly sparse detail, “all else” is unmentioned, unexternalized, “left in obscurity.” In other words, “the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal. . . , remains mysterious and fraught with background” (Auerbach 11–12).

What Auerbach regards as “mysterious,” however, is the result of an interpretive method that anesthetizes the narrative’s meaning by aestheticizing it. Calling this method into question, I am arguing that the Auerbachian “background” is, in fact, the locus of the Akedah narrative’s effort to teach its readers how to escape the allure, unrecognized as anesthetic, of interpretations that attempt to read the “binding” of Isaac aesthetically. Such interpretations (i) strain to rationalize the ethically appalling nature both of the ordeal to which God subjects Abraham and of God’s instrumental use of

the son as the means of testing the father; (ii) they derive the narrative's seeming teleological coherence from the blessing Abraham receives, as if this blessing were already announced in the otherwise unbearably threatening call that Abraham initially hears, as if this blessing could retroactively relieve Abraham of the horror he must commit, including the anticipation of his son's likely terror, and as if the blessing rendered God's motivations and purposes understandable from the outset, and not only acceptable but celebratory as the epitome of his life-bestowing power; (iii) they presuppose that the figurative language in which the blessing is announced is referentially transparent, hence readable; and (iv) they therefore resolutely ignore or explain away or otherwise fail to keep faith with the text's intimation that there is no outside of sacrifice. Against this aestheticizing hermeneutic quest to save the Akedah from its shocking implications, the text's own implicit hermeneutic operations resist all interpretations that numb themselves to the contrary meaning of the narrative background.

As noted, Auerbach reads these interpretive operations through a category—"background"—that is neither descriptive nor analytic but rather is a placeholder term for a worldview binding Abraham's literal and symbolic descendants to the unknown future responsibilities and choices with which their Covenant with God will confront them. Auerbach invokes this "background," with its indefinite existential challenges to come, to designate the kind of empirical (sensory, perceptual, behavioral, cognitive, and affective) detail that Homer foregrounds and that the Old Testament could as well include but in fact leaves unmentioned precisely in order to prepare readers for the destiny-defining trial posed by God's most difficult and unpredictable imperatives. A manifestation of the Akedah's style, the narrative backgrounding points to a radical absence within God's presence; it throws into stark relief humankind's astonishing distance from the infinitude of God even when he makes himself known to be immediately at hand; and thus it removes attention from the quotidian, thereby giving the greatest emphasis to the human struggle to make sense of and not be overwhelmed or dismayed by what God does not disclose about his purposes, by what makes faith in God so challenging, by what makes commitment and fidelity to his imperatives so tortuous, and by what makes any claim of certainty about knowing what loving God requires of one so problematic—as is exemplified in the narrative of the "test" by which Abram becomes Abraham, the patriarch whose genealogical blessing marks the birth of Judaism and centuries later of Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

How does the Akedah enact its textual call for interpretation, dramatized as God's double-binding imperative that Abraham commit an act that is morally abominable? Principally by what it omits. For example, at the outset God "appears," Auerbach observes, "from some unknown height or depth" (8) and addresses Abraham by name. The narrating voice does not specify the time and place of this encounter, nor does it say how God "speaks." Evidently it is in a voice that is not so much literal as supraliminal, somehow enabling Abraham alone to "hear" it, wherever he might be. After Abraham responds, "Here I am," without specifying what he means by "here," God directs him, without explanation, "to take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you" (Genesis 22:2). God does not declare his motivation. He does not say in his own voice what the narrating voice quotes him as saying—that he "tested Abraham"—and what commentators have repeatedly insisted is the self-evident reason—that God subjected Abraham to a trial of faith, even though God has already cut a covenant with him (Genesis 17).<sup>13</sup> Nor does God offer Abraham any hope that he might not have to follow through on the command to extinguish Isaac's life. Abraham for his part does not explain why he obeys, let alone without apparent hesitation, even though he has previously challenged God's intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, which means destroying not only its adults for their wickedness but also its children, including its newborns, those about to be born, and those still in their mothers' wombs.<sup>14</sup> Nor does Abraham object to the ethical meaning of God's demand that he build an altar, bind his son and set him upon it, and set both aflame in an excruciating enactment of an ethical wrong that God himself repudiates throughout the first five books and specifically enjoins and codifies in the commandments he imparts to Moses.

Contributing to the Akedah's stylistic backgrounding, the narrating voice also omits any mention of what happens between Abraham and his son on their journey to Moriah—of how they interact, of whether Abraham somehow indicates his love for his son in ways that accord with God's affirmation that he does. Does Isaac feel his father's love? Does he know what his father feels? Does he understand his father's double-bind? Is he not terrified when he learns that he is to be the sacrifice? Does he try to run from his father, struggle not to be bound, plead with his father as he is being lifted onto the altar? Does he cry out, whimper, shake uncontrollably? The narrating voice does not say. At no time does this voice describe the specific behavior of father and son let alone provide access to their experience of what they are going through. The narrating voice offers nothing about how father and son are affected by the ordeal of the paternal testing.

Nor does the narrating voice explain its own position in the text—its status, unremarked by commentators, as an anonymous witness to the events it relays, as if its authorial presence were unproblematic rather than another aspect of the narrative's background opacity. Is this textual voice decidable as human? Detached from a consciousness that it seems to have or that it simulates, might it be more and less than human?<sup>15</sup> If the limited omniscience of this voice, neither identifiably human nor divine, is to be trusted, why does it stipulate that the "test" is of the patriarch but not of his "dearly beloved" and "only" son? In other words, does the narrative voice not anesthetically deflect attention away from what it omits from its narrative, and does it not thereby encourage readers to find in the Akedah an aestheticizing perception that faith and ethics are concordant, harmoniously joined, bound together in a unity through which they engender a fundamental experience of being existentially protected?

What the narrating voice does not specify about its own perspective is of a piece with what the narrative does not mention about the test. In order to be a test and not a simulation of one, does the testing not require that Abraham believe that he must obey God's command; and that to obey he must, in fact, not only steel himself to slaying his son but must also raise his knife-wielding hand or hands over his son's body and reach the point where the difference between being about to act and beginning to act disappears? In that immeasurable instant, in that faith-driven contraction of his life, has Abraham not intended to kill his son? And has he not, therefore, in effect if not in fact, already sacrificed him, already offered him up to God? Does Isaac himself not recognize that the sacrifice has already occurred, even if he finds himself still alive? Will he ever forget being bound and laid out above the altar pyre? Does he escape being traumatized? Does Abraham recognize the possibility that Isaac will henceforth be haunted by a double terror of both his father and his father's God? Why does the narrating voice specify that "Abraham returned to his young men," those who had accompanied him and Isaac to Moriah, and they "went together to Beer-sheba," with no mention of Isaac?

Why, too, is the blessing given to Abraham by name and not also to Isaac? Why is the blessing relayed through an "angel of the Lord" and not God himself? Why is the first component of the blessing—the genealogical promise—conveyed as a hyperbolic analogy, such that Abraham's descendants will be "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (22:17)? Why is this blessing stated in symbolic rather than literal terms? The second component of the blessing raises the same question. What can it possibly mean that Abraham's offspring "shall possess the gate of their enemies" and that by them "shall all the nations of the earth gain blessings for themselves" (22:17-18)?<sup>16</sup> This double blessing is not translatable as a determinable, decidable, causal outcome. It is, as the vacant causality of the angel's rhetoric indicates, a promise the guarantee of which is the word of the God who has demanded an action that would abrogate its fulfillment. What causal efficacy can inhere in Abraham's obedience such that the blessings of his people's future generations will transfer to their enemies "because," the angel says to Abraham on behalf of God, "you have obeyed my voice" (22:18)? Is the blessing not an idealized cover for an outcome that belies the impossibility of its promise being able to signify what can be known will happen, what is literally to come? Does the blessing not conceal the nature and essence of humankind's reproductivity—



namely, that every conception, every birth, every new life is purchased at the cost of the unknowable infinitude of other conceptions, other births, other lives, and thus other futures that might have occurred had not this particular birth come to pass?

A long tradition of commentary has failed to ask, let alone has attempted to answer, such questions. Two claims that the readability of God's intention and its narrative dramatization is self-evident will illustrate the anesthetizing hermeneutic strategy that characterizes this tradition. Each claim denies that Abraham would, should, or otherwise is prepared to believe that God intends him to immolate his son. According to Louis Jacobs, God's call "was only a 'test,' a divine vindication of Abraham's absolute trust in God. There was never any divine intention for Abraham to kill Isaac. God, being God, could never so deny his own nature as to wish a man to commit a murder in obedience to him." Such certainty, of course, explains away the problem of how a mortal mind can fathom God's transcendental consciousness, if consciousness is even an appropriate name for God's otherness. Insofar as God's "nature" were to be transparent to human understanding, why would it not be the case that the test was to see if Abraham would sacrifice himself rather than his son? Why would God need to use Isaac as the means of vindicating Abraham's trust, a use that from Kant on is recognized as unethical? Moreover, why would God need to vindicate Abraham's faith at all, the vindication occurring before no human audience, no human witness other than Abraham and Isaac?

Similar to Jacobs, Milton Steinberg declares that "From the Jewish viewpoint—and this is one of its highest dignities—the ethical is never suspended, not under any circumstances and not for anyone, not even for God. *Especially not for God.* . . . While it was a merit in Abraham to be willing to sacrifice his only son to his God, it was God's nature and merit that He would not accept an immoral tribute. And it was His purpose, among other things, to establish that truth" (147). If so, how can the truth of the ethical moment encompass the narrative's temporality, its movement from sacrifice demanded to sacrifice prohibited? If God will not accept "an immoral tribute," how is it "a merit in Abraham" to take the call seriously and to be "willing to sacrifice his only son to his God"? If the act of offering a human sacrifice is a heinous practice, how is it meritorious not to object at the outset? Moreover, if God abhors human sacrifice, why the pretense, the charade, of calling for just that act? What kind of speech-act is God's directive if it does not mean what it literally commands? If the two divine communications were reversed—if the angel had directed Abraham to travel to Moriah and there sacrifice a ram, and if at the instant that Abraham had been about to kill the animal God had said "hold" and demanded that Abraham offer up his son instead to prove that by his faith God comes before his obligations to children, family, friends, to all others none of whom is God—would this sequence of imperatives not make explicit not only the infanticidal meaning of God's demand at the outset of Genesis 22 but of God's own unethicity in making this demand?

Any number of other commentators have defended Abraham's faith and implicitly God's demand as ethical without scrutinizing their avoidance of the questions that, as Kierkegaard argued, reveal the ethical violation that introduces the Akedah and governs its drama. I shall not recapitulate the steps of Kierkegaard's arguments leading to his aporetic conclusion—that, on the one hand, Abraham must sacrifice what he loves, not hates, to the God he loves, not hates, even if he hates his God or his son for putting him in the position of sacrificing; but also that, on the other hand, as soon as he chooses God over his son, in "the instant he is ready to sacrifice Isaac," Abraham "is and remains a murderer" (*Fear and Trembling*, 84). In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida draws the inescapable consequence of the infinite distance between and yet infinite convergence of faith and ethical act—that is, of their undecidable difference and similarity:

'the sacrifice of Isaac' illustrates . . . the most common and everyday experience of responsibility. The story is no doubt monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable: a father is ready to put to death his beloved son, his irreplaceable loved one, and that because the Other, the great Other, asks him or orders him without giving the slightest explanation. An infanticide father who hides what he is going to do, without knowing why, from his son and from his family, what could be more abominable, what mystery could be more frightful (*tremendum*) vis-à-vis love, humanity, the family, or morality.

But isn't this also the most common thing? what the most cursory examination of the concept of responsibility cannot fail to affirm? Duty or responsibility binds me to the other. . . . But, of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility. . . . (68)

Ethical decisions and acts are not the opposite of sacrificial decisions and acts. Accepting and acting on one's ethical responsibility provides no escape from the existential bind of having to sacrifice because there is no possibility of establishing the absolute difference of the ethical and the sacrificial that does not immediately reveal the sacrificial condition—the sacrificial history as well as the sacrificial futurity, in other words, the sacrificial background and foreground—of any decision: there is no outside of sacrificality, and this is the case even if no empirical sacrifice takes place. More specifically, the logical form of the sacrificial—not any particular sacrificial act nor the decisions that set them in motion, but what their sacrificality—is the only condition under which a lineage, literal or symbolic, is founded, begotten, produced, effectuated, or otherwise begun. Sacrificality is the very logic of being, hence of any future, including the future that is projected as being traceable back to the decision that institutes it. And yet every *decision for* is a *decision against* all the other choices at hand and thus all the other futures that might otherwise have eventuated from them. For this reason, the future of futurity is always lost at the moment that what can be identified, however indefinitely, as a particular future is in the offing. Moreover, the loss in question is necessarily unknowable and therefore lost as lost.

This absolute loss of what is lost in Abraham's decision to raise his knife over the bound body of the son is figured throughout the Akedah in the singular directionality of its theme and its stylistic embodiments in the repetition of vertical movement—the placing of the wood for the sacrifice on top of the pack animal, the upward movement of the journey to Moriah, the climb up the mountain, the setting of Isaac upon the altar, Abraham's alacrity in "looking up" and seeing a ram when the angel interrupts him from slaying his son, and the etymology of Abraham's name and the word for the sacrifice that Abraham must make. "Abraham" literally means that "the father is high" and metaphorically that "the father is (to be) exalted." The man, whom God will elevate into the role of the father of his people, is, God tells him, to raise his knife-wielding hand in order to make of Isaac "a burnt offering"; the angel uses the same word for sacrifice when, at the last moment, this figure directs Abraham to make of a ram a "burnt offering instead of his son" (22:13). The word for burnt offering or holocaust, *'olāh* means "what goes up in smoke." (Strong 106). Its literal meaning, which is simultaneously symbolic and euphemistic, is not "what dies," "what becomes a corpse," "what is slain," but what disappears as it rises and disperses, hence what designates not the antithesis of death and life but the undecidable difference between and identity of them.

Mirroring and reproducing one another, the Akedah's thematic movements culminate in the rising smoke of the burnt offering, and as they do the entire narrative enacts an intuition that has been implicit until then—namely, that the relation of life to death is non-oppositional, that generativity sets in motion a loss beyond calculation, that being entails and occurs as an infinite loss of being, and that such loss is itself lost. Thus, the movement by which the perceptible traces of a sacrifice's holocaustic smoke are lost to sight is inscribed in the very Hebrew word for being or existence. As Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes: *kiyyum* means "to rise up (*la-koom*), to be tall (*koma zekufa*) in the presence of God" (*Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, 21). In other words, *to be* means, on the one hand, to have the very standing that is denied to the one who is laid out upon the altar. On the other hand, however, *to be* means that anyone and everyone's standing is a knife's edge away from what goes up in smoke and then becomes as invisible and directionless as the "wind from God" that "swept over the face of the waters" before God transforms the "formless void and darkness" into the light of being (Genesis 1:1-2). What goes up in smoke precedes the coming to be of the promised generational

fruition. No standing in the world is outside of the sacrificality that is its condition of possibility. To be is to be in relation to what is not, and is made possible by the cut between being and nothingness, between this being and all the other beings that might have been.

In the imagery of ascent, then, the Akedah simultaneously represents and elucidates its terrible apprehension of the undecidability of God's reproductive blessing: the generativity promised to come, the generativity that will be "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (22:17), will be shadowed by what goes up in smoke; by what can be kept in sight only for the shortest of time in relation to the endlessness of what is lost not only to sight but to cognition; by what no generational gain can begin to account for, let alone retribute. In its linguistically coded evocation of the self-dispersing ascension of the smoke through which the once living then slain body of the sacrificial offering vanishes, the Akedah performs what it does not have the words to say about the sacrificial axis of being.

Over and above its particular stylistic formations, the Akedah includes its principle of self-interpreting composition and its enactment of this principle—that life arises only with and through and because of what goes up in smoke. This enactment, I believe, delimits, suspends, or attempts to remove the anesthetizing hermeneutic allure of God's blessing as without cost, as a pure gain, as if the blessing could annul or at least enable to be dismissed if not forgotten the unimaginable threat with which the narrative begins.

#### 4. Conclusion

The primary principle of evolutionary epistemology is that "there is a universal evolutionary mechanism that led . . . to the evolution of life in general, and . . . that this mechanism is also at work within the evolution of cognition, and within the products of cognition such as language, science and culture" (Gontier, "Evolutionary Epistemology"). In consequence, since every *decision for* is simultaneously a *decision against* that abolishes an infinitude of trajectories that might have begun through a different decision, for that reason the act of deciding metonymically designates the lifedeath structure and entailment of the entire activity of humankind's reflective consciousness. If life is never purely alive; if the living occurs only in its "enigmatic relationship . . . to its other" (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70); if the living includes the trace of what it is not and upon which it depends in order to be; if the living transmits (the transmissibility of) this simultaneously life-enabling and extinction-bearing trace through its biological reproductivity as well as through the changes it effects in the world with which it interacts; then so, too, must humankind's cultural formations be recognized as manifestations of lifedeath. In response, anesthetic criticism, as I envision it, seeks to align ideological critique and evolutionary studies in a common task not only of tracing when, how, and to what extent cultural formations aestheticize their costs and the deathliness that is intrinsic to them—whether by repressing, concealing, rationalizing, justifying, idealizing, or transcendentalizing them—but also and more urgently of clarifying the meaning and confronting the implications of how our species, at every present moment, is already inscribed in the infinitude of lost futures that every human decision begets.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Existence*, from the Latin *stare*, and *cost*, from the Latin *sistere*, both descend from the same Proto-Indo-European stem, *stā-*, “to stand.” Etymologically, the predication “existence costs” specifies an archaic recognition that life arises as an economy of loss. This loss is inevitable and inescapable, the meaning of the Latin root of necessity—*necesse*, which derives from the PIE root *ked-*, “to go, yield,” the source of two words that signify death (*cease* and *decease*) as well as of words that signify reproductive generativity (*ancestor* and *predecessor*). The apothegm, “existence necessarily costs,” is meant to summarize what I consider to be a fundamental problem that evolutionary epistemology must confront—namely, how to account for the evolution of self-reflective consciousness and its autoaffectivity in terms not alone of their adaptive value but also of their adaptive costliness.
- <sup>2</sup> This discussion is part of an ongoing project to specify the implicitly deconstructive character of the evolutionary economy, within which “adaptation” is a placeholder term for what constrains organisms to live as they do. (See Kimball, “Derrida’s Gödelian Protocol, Lifedeath, and the Deconstructive Horizon of the Evolutionary Economy” and Kimball, Gödel’s Proof, Derrida’s Deconstructions, and the Evolutionary Aneconomy of Life/Death.”) Thus, my purpose here does not depend on determining what life is nor on what adaptations are. Rather, my overarching aim is to examine how two canonical works of western literature confront the negative consequences of a consciousness that attempts to interpret itself—in evolutionary terms, that attempts to affirm its presumptive adaptivity—in aestheticizing terms.
- <sup>3</sup> If *Homo sapiens* is a single species, “our” commonality is paradoxical, for we appear to share an autoimmune responsibility that may destroy our species. In numerous works Roberto Exposito has explicated how this paradox “traverses all the languages of modernity,” including “law, theology, anthropology, politics, and biology.” The reason why is that “immunity, as a privative category, only takes on relief as a negative mode of community. Similarly, when viewed in a mirror image, community appears to be entirely immunized, attracted and swallowed up in the form of its opposite. Immunity, in short, is the internal limit which cuts across community, folding it back on itself in a form that is both constitutive and derivative: immunity constitutes or reconstitutes community precisely by negating it” (*Immunitas*, 9).
- <sup>4</sup> My thesis is not about the ontology of an aesthetic object, event, or process. It is about what happens when the conceptual difference between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic is decided in such a way as to conceal its undecidability—that is, its necessary exclusions—the decision implicitly if not explicitly aestheticized. On the one hand, these exclusions are not themselves aesthetic and thus are not included in it. On the other hand, they must be included in the category they make possible. This is the set-theoretical problem of describing the aesthetic from outside the aesthetic. In the analysis offered here, then, the aesthetic is not the decidable opposite of the aesthetic but an uncertain indication of what a given theory of the aesthetic excludes. The uncertainty is double—productive, generative, revelatory, or otherwise valuable, indeed invaluable, and yet nevertheless unavoidably costly, subtractive, partitive, sacrificial.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Odyssey*, Robert Fitzgerald’s translation, book 1, lines 42–43. Subsequent references will be included in the text.
- <sup>6</sup> See Kimball, “Sacrifice, Revenge, and a Justice beyond Justice: *The Odyssey*,” *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, pp. 184–202, and Kimball, “Fiction and Emotion: The Relation of Consciousness to the Economy of Evolution.”
- <sup>7</sup> Odysseus is *δῖεΨόμῃδι* (*polytropos*) (1: 1). He is “the man of many devices,” in A. T. Murray’s translation, and “resourceful” in Fitzgerald’s. Robert Fagles calls him “the man of many twists and turns.”
- <sup>8</sup> See Kimball, “Sacrifice, Revenge, and a Justice beyond Justice: *The Odyssey*,” *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, especially 193–202.
- <sup>9</sup> In *The Unity of the Odyssey*, George Dimock shows how the epic repeatedly associates the name “Odysseus” with the oxymoronic imagery of “sowing” or planting “seeds of evil,” with the metaphorical harvest culminating in the literal slaughter of the Suitors.
- <sup>10</sup> René Girard has expounded his theory of reciprocal violence in numerous works. See, for example, *Violence and the Sacred*, especially chapter two, “The Sacrificial Crisis,” 39–67; or the many online summaries of and commentaries on how Girard’s thesis that humankind’s species-constituting mimetic desire is inherently at risk of turning humans against one another.
- <sup>11</sup> And once Odysseus begins killing the Suitors, Athena herself observes the father and his son not from Olympus but as a swallow perched on a beam under the roof of the great hall (22: 264–266).

- <sup>12</sup> The New Testament begins with Matthew telescoping the Abrahamic lineage and renaming it “the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). Matthew then expands the genealogy with the advent of Jesus its Messianic telos (1:2–17).
- <sup>13</sup> See Kimball, “Infanticide and Reproduction in Genesis,” *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, especially 109–117, on the relation of the literal cutting that occurs in sacrifice to the metaphorical cutting of the covenant, a relation that is written on the male body in the ritual of circumcision.
- <sup>14</sup> See Kimball, “Infanticide and Reproduction in Genesis,” *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, 117–118, on how, when God rains down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24), God “destroys both a particular people (a destruction that includes the possibility of literal infanticide), and through them part of his own creation” (118).
- <sup>15</sup> In *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*, Brian Rotman explores how the technology of writing is able to virtualize consciousness, to abstract it from its biological embodiment, to detach it from the affectivity that underwrites human awareness, and thus to render it relocatable—for example, in a non-human identity: “Lacking all tone, an agency known only through the alphabetic inscription of its words would appear abstract and (chillingly) indifferent to the existence or not of its supposed addressee; it would also, by being unlocatable and unspecifiable as an individual, project an ‘other’—nonhuman—form of identity” (xxxiv).
- <sup>16</sup> Earlier, God has already announced this blessing to Abraham, though with a striking threat that disappears at the end of Genesis 22: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:2–3). What is the basis of those who would curse Abraham—and of God’s mimetic retaliation—if their families are included among “all the families of the earth” to receive a blessing that is universal?

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# Nelson Goodman's Theory of Knowledge and Representation in Henry James's *The Tone of Time*

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**Abstract:** James's fiction often centers on the question: "how can we comprehend representations others present to us?" using art as a third-party vehicle. But representation in James as a device for comprehending his characters' affect and intent is complicated, frequently existing in a state of tension between interior and exterior perceived realities. The use of portraiture in James's late story "The Tone of Time," analyzed in the context of Nelson Goodman's theory of knowledge and particularly his belief that denotation and not resemblance is central to aesthetic comprehension, can assist in clarifying James's notion of engagement with art and artist's intent.

**Keywords:** Nelson Goodman, Henry James, representation, denotation, cognition

Henry James's (1843–1916) fiction often utilizes objects of art to define his characters' sense of reality—both interior as well as external. Viola Hopkins Winner summarizes "James's novelistic artistry and visual sensitivity" as "revealed in the precision with which he selected particular art objects to express shades of meaning" (Winner 80). A poignant example is the dying Milly Theale in James's 1902 novel *The Wings of the Dove*, transfixed by her encounter with a Bronzino portrait that seems a near reflection of Milly herself. James's choice of Bronzino, a High Renaissance mannerist painter, seems designed to reinforce the novel's idealistic portrayal of Milly. Characters defined by aesthetic sensibilities are also prevalent in James's fiction. Examples include Gilbert Osmond in *Portrait of a Lady*, Adam Verver and his daughter Maggie in *The Golden Bowl*, and Adela Gereth in *The Spoils of Poynton*, each of whom views herself, in central ways, as defined by a personal collection of art.

James's fiction often centers on the question: *how can we comprehend representations others present to us?* both individual to individual, and, using art as intermediary, as third-party vehicles for the portrayals of others. James, personally invested in the visual arts (he had a particular fondness for the works of Vermeer), is thus fond of exploiting metaphors related to representation both through ownership as well as creation of art, utilizing three-dimensional media such as sculpture, and two-dimensional works including portrait and landscape painting. Winner reflects that "the foundation of James's defense of the novel as an autonomous art form rests on the resemblances he notes between it and painting" (Winner 68).

It requires perspicacity to unthread the Escher-like complexities of representation in James's stories and novels. Insights provided by the 20<sup>th</sup> century American philosopher Nelson Goodman (1906–1998), heir to the tradition of American Pragmatism, can assist in examining the implications of James's use of art as representation. Goodman, a student of C. I. Lewis and colleague of Quine, challenged many assumptions about the nature of truth, of what we know, and how we know what we know. His most important work touches on fundamental questions involving our underlying

tools of induction and deduction. In the words of Harvard philosopher Catherine Z. Elgin, “Nelson Goodman’s philosophy combines judicious skepticism about received wisdom, uncompromising rigor, and seemingly unbridled creativity in reconfiguring philosophical problems, resources and objectives. The solutions he offers are not permanent resting places, but launch pads for further inquiry” (NG 226). Beardsley characterizes Goodman’s primary thesis in his *Language of Art* as “a pro-legomenon to all future discussions of the subject, for it has changed the terms of such discussions radically” (Beardsley 96).

James’s challenge to a simplistic notion of representation is found throughout his fiction and essays. That he views novelistic representation as conjoined with pictorial imagery is explicitly affirmed in his essay *The Art of Fiction* (1884), where he asserts that he finds it impossible to disentangle the imagined from the representational:

A psychological reason is, to my imagination, an object adorably pictorial; to catch the tint of its complexion—I feel as if that idea might inspire one to Titianesque efforts. There are few things more exciting to me, in short, than a psychological reason (LC1 61).

The centrality of image to the imaginative life of the individual is evidenced in James’s Preface to *A Little Tour of France* (1900), where he comments that “there is no happy mean... I hold, between the sense and the quest of the picture, and the surrender to it, and the sense and the quest of the constitution, the inner springs of the subject—springs and connections social, economic, historic” (TW 3).

An 1887 essay on John Singer Sargent provides a window into James’s expansive notion of an artist’s responsibilities, in the context of what he sees as representation’s inherent richness. In discussing Singer Sargent’s artistic output, James offers a bold assertion, stating that,

[While] There is no greater work of art than a great portrait... the highest result is achieved when... a certain faculty of lingering reflection is added. I use this name for want of a better, and I mean the quality in the light of which the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, elevates and humanizes the technical problem (1887, 691).

In suggesting such an expansive notion of representation, James presages sentiments of later modernist thinkers. Gertrude Stein in 1934, for instance, echoes James when she observes that a painting “must have its own life,” and that “a painter’s literary idea always consists not in the action but in the distortion of the form” (242-3).

While issues involving the convergence of art and individual are found across James’s fiction, his late story *The Tone of Time* (1900) provides an especially interesting set of complexities to the questions of representation. Its focus on the production of a portrait—especially since the portrait represents an individual who is deceased but who nonetheless casts a long shadow—gives it special resonance. Michal Peled Ginsburg summarizes the potency of portraiture in James’s fiction as providing a sort of double framework, given that “the portrait—the most obviously referential form of representation—cannot be understood in a naively mimetic sense, since the ‘art’ of seeing and representing is as much an element of the picture as the ‘life’ it represents” (167).

In this late work, an unnamed painter (the story’s narrator) turns over a commission from a wealthy widow, Mrs. Bridgenorth, to a colleague he deems more capable than himself of taking on the task. The strictures of Mrs. Bridgenorth’s commission at first blush seem anodyne: she wishes to have a painting of an imaginary man, which should appear as though it were painted two decades earlier. Her only additional requirement is that the portrait reflect “a *tres-bel homme*.” (CS5 307).

The narrator, thus believing he is providing his colleague a free hand, justifies bringing this commission to fellow portrait artist Mary Tredick, because he believes that, while he “can do but the face I see,” she can “see so many more” (307). The narrator’s colleague Mary, “an old, old friend,” is introduced as an aging and melancholy individual who had “given up everything but her work...” (306). Upon presenting Mary with the commission, the perceptive narrator senses that the very



notion of fabricating, *tabula rasa*, a faux portrait stimulated something deep within her: "I had touched, without intention, more than one spring; I had set in motion more than one impulse" (310). We sense that Mary's response arises from a complicated mélange of emotions: "I shall," Mary specifies, "make him supremely beautiful—and supremely base" (310).

We are never told of Mrs. Bridgenorth's motivation for wanting a faux portrait from a bygone era, except for the narrator's insight that "She clearly counted that [the portrait] would help her" (312). But as the story develops, inferences accumulate. In a series of ironic twists, Mary resolves to use as her model a man who jilted her years earlier, and so tackles the work with a great amount of pent-up emotion. "If I was to do the most beautiful man in the world," Mary confesses to the narrator, "I could do but one" (312).

Over time, we discover that Mary's model for her painting turns out to have been the same man who also had an amorous fling with the widow who commissioned the work. Mary, unaware of this complication, creates a work of stunning power, having approached her work with great emotion. "She had produced an extraordinary thing," observes the narrator. "My only reserve, from the first, was that it was too fine for its part..." (313), further characterizing the work as "beautiful and the suggestion infinite" (314). But at the same time, the narrator presents us with a perplexing equivocation, stating that the figure in the painting, in some indefinite way too perfect, "managed to be at once a triumphant trick and a plausible evocation" (314). Mary, still reeling from unresolved, raw emotion because of revisiting her long-ago affair, confesses that her motivation for the work was in fact "all *hate!*" (314).

Mrs. Bridgenorth's reaction when she sees the painting is immediate and overpowering: "She couldn't control... poor woman, the strong colour in her face and the quick tears in her eyes. She could only glare at the canvas, gasping, grimacing, and try to gain time" (316).

Details emerge. We learn that Mary is convinced that the subject of the portrait would have married her but for the complications of his relations with another woman, who turns out (needless to say) to have been Mrs. Bridgenorth. This is all especially ironic, given that Mary never meets Mrs. Bridgenorth, and claims when she receives the commission to not be familiar with anyone of that name, and thus entirely innocent of any specific intention behind the commission.

Nonetheless, Mrs. Bridgenorth, immediately perceiving who the artist is after the work is unveiled, is now desperate to own the portrait, willing to pay any cost for it, even as she believes the narrator's insistence that Mary is ignorant of who commissioned the work. Mrs. Bridgenorth confesses to the narrator that, were the subject of the portrait to have lived, she was to have married him. Realizing that if Mary becomes aware of who she is, "she won't let me have the picture" (318), Mrs. Bridgenorth attempts to bargain with the narrator, telling him that if he keeps her confidences, she will pay the artist double for the work.

Mary, having now inferred who commissioned the painting, becomes dead set against allowing Mrs. Bridgenorth to own it. Contrary to Mrs. Bridgenorth's back-story, Mary's take, as expressed to the narrator, is that it was her lover's affair with Mrs. Bridgenorth that prevented him from committing himself to Mary. Mary insists that Mrs. Bridgenorth "tried to make him marry her, and he was very near it. Death, however, saved him. But she was the reason" (323). The story concludes with Mary informing the narrator that she will hang on to the portrait until she dies, at which point she wishes to see the painting given to the narrator. After both women die, the narrator inherits the painting.

James's *The Tone of Time*, embedded with these almost impossible sets of coincidences, probes a range of complex issues about representation. Ginsburg observes that Mrs. Bridgenorth's commission is meant but to "*appear* as a substitute... for a non-existent person," and thus is "an empty sign whose function is to 'produce' its supposed referent." Ginsburg equates the responses of both women as resonating to a kind of a "ghostly apparition" of a man who "seems to exist only as a portrait." Thus, Ginsburg concludes, "When the portrait is completed and its sitter recognized by Mrs. Bridgenorth, the portrait does not become 'the next best thing' to the man but rather the man himself" (170-1).

As is common in many of James's works, issues are framed in a series of unanswered questions: Why, to begin, was Mrs. Bridgenorth so invested in owning a fictitious portrait, the only requirement being that it represented a man from two decades earlier? Was she motivated by a need to sort through unresolved emotions? Or, at the other extreme, was her commission an attempt to publicly celebrate a settled narrative that, two decades removed, is either reified in her memory or a willful imposition of autobiographical fiction (e.g., a wish to be seen as a respectable widow)? That her motivation might have been the former is suggested by Mrs. Bridgenorth's viscerally anguished response upon seeing the final product. That it might instead have been the latter is bolstered by James's framing of the intended place for the finished work: "a boudoir...overlooking the general garden of the approved modern row and, as she said only just wanting that touch..." (311). Further support for the latter possibility is Mary's observation that she does not recognize her nemesis's name, thus suggesting *Bridgenorth* might be a fictitious *nom de mariage*.

In a larger context, is James suggesting that a non-specific artwork *could* have succeeded in fulfilling either of Mrs. Bridgenorth's requirements?

Shifting from the viewpoint of patron to artist, did Mary's deliberate attempt to leverage pent-up emotional fodder contribute to the potency and authenticity of her portrait? Why, in the first place, would Mary, offered a commission for, *tabula rasa*, a picture of an imaginary man, elect to paint the lover who jilted her so many years earlier? Was this an attempt for catharsis, or was it an opportunity to paint a more powerful piece of art than if she had simply attempted, *tabula rasa*, a fictitious artwork? Was the temporal requirement of the commission—that it hearken to a specific decade—the key to stimulating the need in the artist to revisit her personal experiences during that same timeframe? Should we assume that the creation of a portrait even *can* succeed in addressing unresolved emotional issues such as Mary's? Is it plausible to imagine that the reception of a single portrait could fulfill the emotional needs for *both* Mrs. Bridgenorth and Mary, given their different memories of their experiences with their (putative) shared lover? And if it can serve this purpose, how much likeness between the faux portrait and to their shared lover is required to fulfill this need?

More broadly: if the commission was intended to result in a non-specific work, but instead succeeded in capturing a tangible likeness, what, in the end, defines fiction versus *real* in a work of art? (Would, for instance, a photo of the deceased lover serve most effectively?) And, most fundamentally: if an unschooled observer were to encounter Mary's portrait (say, as it hangs in a museum), would her aesthetic experience be diminished in any meaningful sense by being deprived of the work's back story?

The above questions accumulate recursively through James's tightly packed tale, where we are first presented with the author's assignment of a narrator; then, afforded a window into the quizzical desires of a would-be art recipient (Mrs. Bridgenorth), as they are conveyed by the narrator to his colleague (Mary); after which we are provided insights into the motivations of the artist in tackling the work; then, we're provided information on the impact of the finished work on both artist and would-be recipient (a tumult of emotions and conflicting back stories); ultimately, in service to an unspecified aesthetic experience intended for *us*, James's readers. Lurking behind every one of the above perspectives is an overarching question: just what, in this concatenation of an intended artwork desired by a patron, created by an artist, and subsequently reacted to by both (all for the ultimate edification of *us* the readers), *is* being represented? Is Mary's painting a shared representation of a dead lover from long ago, or does it represent for each of them, as well as for the narrator and then for us as the reader, something unique and personal in each case? And, are James's readers, unlike the characters in James's story, oddly handicapped because, ironically, we are not privy to the painting itself?

Goodman's groundbreaking work on aesthetics can assist in understanding James's use of representation in *Tone of Time*, where conflation of subject, artistic intent, and interpretation create epistemic complexities. N. Falk, commenting on Goodman's insights, offers that "The relation be-

tween portrait and thing portrayed cannot...be studied independently of, or throw light on, the general question of how art is attached to the world; and a failure to realize this leads to a trivialization of the questions with which aesthetics ought to concern itself" (181).

Goodman's work involved formal logic and the philosophy of science, but he also was a significant voice in the philosophy of art. Importantly, Goodman believed that art and science share a common underpinning that requires, in each case, logic and utilization of symbols. In this respect, he seems the grandchild of one of the originators of American Pragmatism, C. S. Peirce, who was an early exponent of semiotics and believed that logic underpins all questioning of value. Goodman is also an example of the rarely encountered analytic philosopher who has deep knowledge of and experience with the world of art. During his protracted time working on his Ph.D at Harvard, probably primarily because of being Jewish and therefore not eligible for a graduate fellowship (CRSEC sec. 1), Goodman served for a period of 12 years as director of the *Walker-Goodman Art Gallery* in Boston. Later, as a professor at Harvard, Goodman founded a center he named *Project-Zero* to improve education in the arts. He was a passionate art collector, and a capacious thinker whose works on aesthetics, especially his 1968 *Languages of Art*, are considered seminal to the advancement of the philosophy of art.

Some of Goodman's most important thinking centers around a synthesis of logical empiricism and American Pragmatism (CRSEC sec. 2). In bringing these two philosophical movements together, Goodman manages to disavow some of the basic tenets of both, denying the notion of a *given* in response to his teacher C. I. Lewis (and thus in accord with Sellars), and denying the division of analytic and synthetic in response to logical empiricism (in accord with his colleague Quine). Goodman's most important work, *the Structure of Appearance*, which was developed from his Ph.D thesis, begins with the anti-foundationalist notion that all judgments are capable of revision (CRSEC sec. 2). From that, he develops an intricately constructed thesis that is bereft of any "fundamental ontological objects...logical principles, and...representation systems" (CRSEC sec. 2.1). Goodman is, additionally, widely known because of his reconsideration of the nature of the process of induction, through his vivid riddle that has come to be known as the *grue paradox*. Responding to Hume's challenge of establishing a rational basis for causality (Hume having asserted that it is really *habit* that encourages us to *assume* that something we have observed will with any certitude recur), Goodman observed that we set rules for inductive reasoning by making implicit compromises to derive a maximum amount of information from our sets of inquiries. Goodman thus believes that scrutiny involves establishing *a priori* priorities to our investigations, through the choices we make in how we frame the questions we ask. "Truth," he asserts, "far from being a solemn and severe master, is a docile and obedient servant" (WOW 18). "Regularities," Goodman asserts, "are where you find them, and you can find them anywhere" (AGSEC sec. 2).<sup>1</sup>

This notion of truth as beholden to constructed apriority is echoed in a statement of literary critic William Gass:

Any principle that permits the rational expectation of some situation upon the occurrence of another is a principle of inference, and such a principle is called a rule when the conclusion to be inferred awaits an inferring power—a power that must be, therefore, ordered to its task—and is called a law when the inferring power acts, as it were, from within its premises (21).

Goodman's most important insight in looking at art is that art is, counterintuitively, a *cognitive* undertaking, just as is science, and that both rely on *symbols* for understanding. But Goodman's definition of cognition is broad: "In contending that aesthetic experience is cognitive, I am emphatically not identifying it with the conceptual, the discursive, the linguistic. Under "cognitive" I include all aspect of knowing and understanding, from perceptual discrimination through pattern recognition and emotive insight to logical inference" (MOM 84).<sup>2</sup>

Artworks, he asserts, rely on our *interpretation of symbols* to convey understanding. And further, both symbols and concomitant interpretation are constrained to what Goodman assigns as specific

“worlds.” “Which symbols are successfully projected over time,” Giovannelli comments in an essay on Goodman’s aesthetics, “largely depends on what is customary, “entrenched,” within a certain cultural, artistic, or linguistic community” (AGSEC sec. 2). This circles back to Goodman’s observation about the relatively arbitrary nature of the underpinnings of induction. Goodman’s central point is that there is an onus on the recipient of a work of art to comprehend its symbolic properties while at the same time not becoming distracted by questions of “expression.” “Identifying the properties of a literary—or pictorial or musical—style matters more than further classifying them into ways of saying, exemplifying, and expressing” (WOW 33).

To comprehend a work of art, Goodman stresses, involves cognitive processing of its underlying symbols: “Style,” he stresses, “has to do exclusively with the symbolic function of a work as such” (WOW 35). Goodman subtitled his 1968 *Languages of Art* “An approach to a theory of symbols,” positing artistic explorations not as aesthetic inquiry per se, but rather as windows into “a general theory of symbols” (LA xi). Goodman reflects in the introduction to the book that he would have preferred to title the book *Symbol Systems of Art* (LA xi-xii).

This differentiation between cognitive understanding and expressive intent is crucial to comprehending what, for Goodman, Mary’s role as portrait artist in *Tone of Time* would entail. Goodman believes that the meaning of a work of art “does not rest upon an artist’s intentions.” Rather, he stresses, “what counts are properties symbolized, whether or not the artist chose or is even aware of them...” (WOW 36).

In discussing denotation, Goodman comments that

The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Nor is resemblance *necessary* for reference; almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents—like a passage that describes—an object refers to and, more particularly, *denotes* it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance (LA 5).

Goodman’s thesis that representation, independent of resemblance, is a type of denotation, has been found to be both innovative as well as controversial.<sup>3</sup> James Elkins characterizes *Languages of Arts* “a centrally important text for the ongoing discourse on the relations of the verbal and the visual” (349). In its clarification of emotional response as orthogonal to aesthetic comprehension, Goodman’s thesis seems apposite to the scenario James presents, where we have two interested parties who resonate to a work of art, even as they come at this work from (apparently) opposite corners of experience.

Mrs. Bridgenorth is expecting a generalized work of art that she can hang in her boudoir to provide evidence (we assume) that she is a widow of a respectable man who was in his prime several decades ago. Mary, however, paints not an anonymous individual as requested, but rather one who deeply effected both women. Mary creates the work from “hate,” but we don’t get any sense that Mrs. Bridgenorth, upon the shock of recognizing the subject of Mary’s work, resonates to the “hateful” aspect of the work. She simply recognizes the individual and, it seems, reacts with personalized emotions that well up within her.

Goodman stresses that the assumption, normally implicit, that art is, primarily, defined by its emotional content is both fallacious as well as distracting:

My insistence on the cognitive aspect of art makes...others fear that I am bent on anaesthetizing the aesthetic. What I want to emphasize is that pleasure or even ecstasy alone, without insight or inquiry, without recognition of significant distinctions and relationships, without effect on the way we see and understand a world including the object itself, can hardly be considered aesthetic (MOM 7).

Rather, as expressed by Cohnitz and Rossberg, Goodman believes we “judge how realistic a picture is by how readily we can retrieve information from it about the object it represents” (NG 172). To Goodman, the notion that “an artwork expresses the emotion it causes, or is caused by” is but an artifact of a popular Romantic-era assumption (NG 175). Further, adhering to a simplistic

goal of "accurate" imitation, to Goodman, is degrading. Reacting to the assumption that "To make a faithful picture, come as close as possible to copying the object just as it is," Goodman comments that "This simple-minded injunction baffles me; for the object before me is a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a fiddler, a friend, a fool, and much more" (LA 6).<sup>4</sup>

Goodman's aspersions of the "simple-minded injunction" of "*faithful imitation*" is as much about the a priori constraints of artist as it is about the complexity of subject: "The catch," he asserts, "is that there is no innocent eye. The eye comes always ancient to its work, obsessed by its own past and by old and new insinuations of the ear, nose, tongue, fingers, heart, and brain... It does not so much mirror as take and make..." (LA 7-8). This suggests that Mary would have faced constraints no matter where she found inspiration for her portrait, whether in a recreation of her former lover, or instead in a fictitious subject as Mrs. Bridgenorth requested.

A central theme of Goodman's scrutiny of art from the point of view of analytic philosophy is that aesthetics is a branch of epistemology. Indeed, Goodman believes that both art and science are united in this goal. Fueling the task of understanding art, Goodman stresses, is an informed *understanding*,<sup>5</sup> which he believes amounts to being adept in processing symbols utilized in the work. This requires coming to a clear understanding of words, in literature; notation, in music; color, texture, perspective, and line in art; and movement, in dance. And attaining such understanding, Goodman explains, further requires that the symbols of the medium in question can serve as *references* for modes of inquiry, including denotation and exemplification.

*Denotation* is defined as the relationship between something and its label. Goodman argues surprisingly that a picture is problematic when it attempts to directly *resemble* something or someone. His proof of this is that resemblance, in contradistinction to representation, is reflexive and symmetric: to *resemble* means that *B is as much like A as A is like B*. A painting, Goodman says, may represent the Duke of Wellington, but the Duke of Wellington does not "represent" the painting (LA 4).<sup>6</sup> But at the same time, the painting of the Duke of Wellington does *denote* the Duke, serving as a clear *label* for him, whether the particular snapshot (in Goodman's example, of the Duke) captured by the artist is inherently limited to a constrained or unspecified time frame, or even is a representation of a fictional character. Thus, the *painting* of the Duke stands as a *symbol* of its subject.

The specific symbols of denotation, Goodman stresses, comprise the defining aspects of any work of art. As a result, responsibility rests on the recipient to understand the symbols that inhere in the work to participate intelligently in an aesthetic experience. "Denotation," Goodman stresses, "is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance" (LA 5). Chasid summarizes Goodman's thesis as: *The pictorial relation is identical to reference* (227).

The import of Goodman's insight that denotation is central to an art experience addresses what Goodman would argue is a commonly misplaced notion of causality: the implicit assumption that an art experience, if galvanized by an emotional reaction to a work of art, is thus *defined* by the emotions as initially experienced. Goodman's argument suggests that causality is more complex than that: we might have a visceral reaction to stimuli,<sup>7</sup> but for the experience to rise to the level of *art* requires cognitive processing of its component parts.

Thus, Goodman's determination that

Symbolization... is to be judged fundamentally by how well it serves the cognitive purpose: by the delicacy of its discriminations and the aptness of its allusions; by the way it works in grasping, exploring, and informing the world; by how it analyzes, sorts, orders, and organizes; by how it participates in the making, manipulation, retention, and transformation of knowledge (LA 258).

The notion that emotional response is not key to aesthetic understanding is, of course, unsettling as well as counterintuitive. Sparshott, in parsing Goodman's reliance on symbolism as central to artistic comprehension, addresses this in commenting that:

A work of art expresses an intuition. But what aspect of it? Not the fact of its intuitiveness, but the quiddity of what is intuited. What is expressed is indeed a quality, as Goodmanian analysis requires. But



this quality is not, as in the romantic version, literally a quality of the expression. On the contrary, it is precisely that quality which the impression as such lacks: that of having a peculiar sort of comprehended and enjoyed order (195-6).

Elgin adds that Goodman's conception of art as a cognitive undertaking, far from constraining an encounter with art, can serve to expand one's aesthetic experience: "By attending constantly to the symbols themselves we gain new ways of seeing, hearing, and understanding not just the symbols... Successful encounters with the arts yield new world-versions, new structures of appearance and of reality" (2001, 687).

If we assume that there is a shared understanding of Mary's portrait *as a work of art* by the two women in James's tale not because of common emotional resonance, but rather because they can each come to a personal but nonetheless "informed" understanding of what the portrait denotes, we can (Goodman would say) come to a rational understanding of the work itself. This does not abrogate immediate, strong emotions involved in the case of the two women. They presumably would have equally strong reactions to any potent representation of their lover two decades removed, whether or not the stimulus they experienced rose to the level of *art*. Rather, it gives license for anyone who has the proper "tools" of analysis to contextualize and elevate Mary's portrait *as art*, including both women invested in memories of the man in the portrait, but also including an innocent observer of the work unaware of its back story. Goodman's Pragmatic predecessor Peirce argues similarly when he discusses the importance of what he terms "prescission," wherein one can separate attributes of an object to better understand its meaning (involving, in Peirce's case, the parsing of the object's firstness, secondness, and thirdness).

From this perspective, Mary's portrait denotes her (and Mrs. Bridgenorth's) shared lover, but it cannot rise to the level of resemblance. This is because their shared lover, despite any level of realism expressed by the portrait, is incapable of representing the portrait itself. This is significant in addressing our earlier question, because if the work is a denotation and not a resemblance, it potentially fulfills a more constrained role. Presumably, the simple *mentioning* of the name of the putative shared lover would stimulate a high level of emotional resonance, but one would not argue that such an experience constitutes *art*. Ginsburg points out that, because the painting in *Tone of Time* is at the same time a picture of a dead man and an attempt to convey "the false impression of having been painted in the past, the fiction of the painting and the fiction of the man's being alive become the same" (173).

Symbols can both denote as well as exemplify. In the English language, for instance, the symbol *system* is the letters a-z; the symbol *scheme* is the collection of letters into words, governed by roles of syntax and semantics; its *denotation* involves items within its field of reference. Goodman deems denotation the distinctively salient aspect of pictures. *Exemplification* refers to some aspect of the label (or predicate).

Returning to our example of the portrait of the Duke of Wellington, portraying him on his horse in a hunt would exemplify a specific aspect of his leisure predilections. *Exemplification* is thus a limited or confined aspect of a denoted object or thing. A tailor's swatch can *exemplify* a specific color, weave, and fabric, though it does not denote an entire piece of clothing. Exemplification and denotation, each in its own role, are important tools in Goodman's toolbox for coming to grips with the symbols involved in interpretation. In the realm of Mary's portrait, her work can exemplify specific aspects of a shared lover, and this can help explain the overlap in emotional response between the two.

As explained by Elgin:

To understand a portrait, a partita, or a pas de deux, Goodman believes, is not to consider it beautiful, appreciate it, ascertain what its author intended by it, or have a so-called "aesthetic experience" of it. Rather, to understand it is to interpret it correctly... **Understanding works of art is not a matter of passive absorption, but of active intellectual engagement with symbols...** (Elgin 1997, as quoted in NG 163-4).

What this implies is that a recipient must endeavor to *intelligently* understand a work of art by grappling with the symbols that fuel and define it. Representation, Goodman believes, is not imitation. It rather involves adept interpretation of a symbolic system that arises as a part of a notational system. And for symbols to comprise a notational scheme, according to Goodman they need to adhere to a set of syntactic and semantic criteria he identifies as essential to comprise a notation (NG 150).<sup>8</sup> Goodman's conditions come from his determination of what he sees as the goals for notation, allowing him to, *post hoc*, define a symbol system as one that conforms to these goals.

It is important to reconcile Elgin's notion of "correct" interpretation with James's fixation with the imagination. As summarized by Weinstein, "Events seen in the mind and reflected upon, anticipated, imagined, or remembered, assume a greater burden of importance...throughout James's fiction, than the actual events themselves" (33). But this does not mean that Goodman's emphasis on "correct" understanding of symbols is misplaced. I have bolded the relevant portion of Elgin's statement: that "active engagement" and not "passive absorption" is key to achieving an understanding of representation. *Active engagement*, Goodman argues, requires understanding of symbols, but it does not invalidate Weinstein's observation about James's fixation on the imagination. Rather, it can be argued that emersion in and familiarity with symbols underpinning a work of art *facilitates* the imagination to pursue representational possibilities.

In James's *The Tone of Time*, it is not relevant whether the woman who commissioned the portrait knows or is aware of the affective state of the artist. What counts is that she can synthesize the art work's visual symbols to gain a holistic notion of the work itself. Such a process can facilitate a helpful denotation, or label for the work (in this case, identifying it as a portrait of the man she once knew) and an exemplification as well (conveying, for her, a generalized meaning that in the artist's work relates to personal love lost). This would suggest that Mrs. Bridgenorth might have come to the same visceral place with a fictitious "portrait," as long as Mary fulfilled her requirement: *portrait of "a tres-bel homme" as he would have looked twenty years ago*.

Goodman believes that metaphor in art essentially *creates* a sense of similarity rather than recapturing similarities that existed previously. In that respect, Mary's commissioned portrait in *The Tone of Time* can be seen as creating the *opportunity* for two women who have had no shared experiences for at least twenty years to identify commonalities through the artwork itself. "Reception and interpretation," Goodman comments, "are not separable operations; they are thoroughly interdependent" (LA 8).

In fact, Goodman is clear that denotation and exemplification can operate appropriately whether a work of art is a representation of anything real (a so called two-place predicate) or rather a portrayal of a fictitious and fanciful subject such as a unicorn (a one-place predicate) (see NG 143). "A picture," Goodman says, "must denote a man to represent him, but need not denote anything to be a man-representation" (LA 25). And Goodman goes on to assert that in many instances the line between the two is not clearly discernable, stating that "the information needed to determine what if anything is denoted by a picture is not always accessible" (LA 26). In this sense, even while Ginsburg notes that *Tone of Time* deals with "fiction and illusion," Goodman would allow that there can nonetheless be a legitimate sense of its meaning. "Representation is thus disengaged from perverted ideas of it as an idiosyncratic physical process like mirroring, and is recognized as a symbolic relationship that is relative and variable" (LA 43).

There is another issue imbedded in James's *the Tone of Time* that Goodman addresses as well, this one involving counterfactual conditionals. The portrait artist Mary, once it becomes clear for whom she has unwittingly created her painting, directs her ire at Mrs. Bridgenorth, because she reflects that, *were* Mrs. Bridgenorth to have *not* been in the picture, her lover thus *would have* committed himself to Mary. We have no way to verify any of this, of course.

According to Goodman, counterfactuals present important and complicated epistemic challenges. In his 1955 book *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, Goodman points out that all counterfactuals are logically true if considered as truth-functional compounds. *De re*, it is impossible to refute Mary's notion that

Mrs. Bridgenorth's relationship with the man in the portrait derailed Mary's chances for happiness. The challenge, Goodman points out, is to set up a "criterion of truth . . . in the face of the fact that a counterfactual by its nature can never be subjected to any direct empirical test by realizing its antecedent" (FFF 4). The reason or set of reasons Mary never was successful in affirming her relationship with the subject of her portrait is a matter of pure conjecture.

Goodman additionally points out the possibility for what he calls a *semifactual*. In this case, an example would be Mrs. Bridgenorth's possible counter to Mary that *if she and the man in the portrait had established a relationship, it would not have worked out*. From this, Goodman would observe, we can glean the generalization that semifactuals affirm, while counterfactuals deny.

In both cases, Goodman tells us, the challenge, assessing the worth of a statement with an antecedent that can't be proven to lead to a consequent, is to study what he calls the *relevant conditions* underlying the statement. In some cases, "cotenability", which relates to prior solutions that equate to the specific contrapositive assertion, can help, but in the realm of Mary's relationship to this unknown man there are clearly too many imponderables to allow for such a consideration. Probably the best we can do, Goodman suggests, is to try to remove the modality that is causing the confusion in the first place and see if we then have a justifiable statement. This would leave us with the assertion that *were* circumstances propitious for Mary (e.g., no such person as Mrs. Bridgenorth), her relations with her aspirational lover *would have* been successful. Since we can't make sense of that statement—maybe the problem instead was an inability of the aspirational lover to commit to *anyone*; or fantastically, maybe both women invented a fictitious man in their imaginations, each for her own reason—we can never assess the potential validity of Mary's counterfactual assertion. As Edmund Wilson points out, James's fiction is peppered with "unmistakable cases of women . . . who deceive themselves and others about the origins of their aims and emotions" (97).

Seen in this guise, it becomes clear that James's story is, at essence, about reawakening the unresolvable. Mrs. Bridgenorth's commission and Mary's response seem in both cases to be attempts to deal *post hoc* with lingering emotional issues that accept of no resolution. The metaphoric portrait ending up in the possession of the unnamed narrator suggests that pursuit of resolutions to unresolvable issues is, in the end, intrinsically hollow.

In James's late (1908) story *The Jolly Corner*, longtime expat Spencer Brydon returns to New York to raze his family's abandoned property. While there he encounters spectral voices and haunting imagery that suggest his life would have been markedly different had he not elected to leave home three decades earlier. Brydon is terrified by the jarring disconnect between his chosen life as expat and the life he would have led in New York. The alternative of a life not chosen, precisely because it seems credible, creates a disconnect so great as to be unfathomable: "The face *that* face, Spencer Brydon's?—he searched it still, but looking away from it in dismay and denial . . . the face was the face of a stranger" (CS5 725).

From this last example we can glean the importance of an overarching theme in Goodman's ontology, his insistence that "many different world-versions are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base" (WW 4), and "Identity or constancy in a world is identity with respect to what is within that world as organized" (WW 8). Because Goodman believes that we can endorse varied "worlds" with equal validity (an example he offers is that earth can be understood as either stationary or in motion—both are valid and in a sense independent), he as a result expresses the view that "Realistic representation . . . depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation" (LA 38). "Truth," Goodman offers, "cannot be defined or tested by agreement with 'the world'; for not only do truths differ for different worlds but the nature of agreement between a version and a world apart from it is notoriously nebulous." Rather, he says, "a version is taken to be true when it offends no unyielding beliefs and none of its own precepts" (WW 17).

"That we know what we see," Goodman explains in an essay from 1960, "is no truer than we see what we know. Perception depends heavily on conceptual schemata" (AGSEC sec. 4.1).<sup>9</sup> And in a



riff on Kant's famous maxim that *experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play*, Goodman states that "although conception without perception is merely *empty*, perception without conception is *blind* (totally inoperative)" (*WW* 6). "Thinking in words or pictures or other symbols..." Goodman says, "is a process of preparation or state of preparedness for producing or judging or perceiving such symbols" (*MOM* 27).

Thus, Mrs. Bridgenorth and Mary are primed to experience Mary's artistic creation through a world view that they already, even if unknowingly, share. We, as innocent observers of Mary's art, may not be privy to their back stories, but if we understand the structure, components, and symbols involved in Jamesian prose we can utilize these cognitive abilities to grasp what Goodman refers to as the "referential function" of his artistic work. Whether or not, to Goodman, Mary's portrait is a true representation is irrelevant. "We risk confusion when we speak of pictures or predicates as 'true of' what they depict or apply to; they have no truth-value..." (*WW* 19). And this is because we can't succeed in "copying" reality when we are unable "to specify what is to be copied." In summary, Goodman stresses that "In representing an object, we do not copy such a construal or interpretation—we *achieve* it" (*LA* 9). "Realism," he asserts, "is relative" (*LA* 37).

In thinking about meaning in representation, it is easy, Goodman reminds us, to fall into a trap. We often assume that the apparent neutrality of a reflected image ameliorates issues of accurate representation. The cultural historian Melchior-Bonnet offers a vivid counter to that assumption in her retelling of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Korean legend (cast in various iterations across different cultures). Melchior-Bonnet's version involves a poor pottery merchant named Pak. Pak's wife has an obsessive dream, in which she feels that she absolutely must own a mirror. Pak finds her one. When she gazes into it, she's aghast to see that standing next to Pak in the reflection is an unfamiliar woman who looks like an utter tramp. Not realizing that this is she, she cries out in alarm. Pak grabs the mirror and is completely infuriated to see a man standing next to his wife who clearly looks like he must be her lover. A vicious marital fight ensues. In a last-ditch effort to bring some resolution to their individual grievances, they bring the mirror to the village prefect. The prefect looks into the mirror, and is devastated to see a strange civil servant, dressed in full uniform, who clearly is there to replace him... (4-5).

Mirrors, like Mary's portrait, are there to represent. But representing, as we have examined, is fraught with inherent complication. "The copy theory of representation," Goodman asserts, "is stopped at the start by inability to specify what is to be copied" (*LA* 9). As summarized by Falk: "To say that a painting is a representation of a particular face means we have the right to ask Which face? But this does not mean that we have the right to an answer" (187).

James seems very much in accord when he reflects that:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it (*LC2* 1041).

For Goodman, *denotation* is the central concern of art precisely because art is, intrinsically, a complicated cognitive undertaking requiring processing of symbols and delineation of "worlds." Goodman's insights on the cognitive requirements for experiencing art can thus assist in illuminating the complexities of *representation* as expressed in James's tightly woven tale of passions unleashed by two individuals who share in a portrait's collective secrets.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Peirce expresses a similar sentiment in an 1886 letter to F.E. Abbott when he asserts that “all deductive reasoning, even simple syllogism, involves an element of observation...I grant you one cannot perceive relations without a perceptive understanding.” Peirce (1993) 281.
- <sup>2</sup> David Sakris and Rosenberg Larsen (2011) make a similar point.
- <sup>3</sup> See Arrell (1987). Perspectives on Goodman’s thesis can be found in Leonard Beardsley (1978); Giovannelli sec. 4.1, Sparshott (1974), Walton (1974), Chasid (2004), Files, (1996), Lammenranta (1992), Carrier (1974), Mitchell, (1991). Davies (1991) discusses Goodman’s and Elgin’s differentiation of symbol systems as employed in the visual arts versus in texts. Abel (1991) offers an expansive accounting of Goodman’s symbol system as it relates to his ontology.
- <sup>4</sup> Goodman points to Picasso’s famous reaction to criticism that his portrait of Gertrude Stein did not resemble her by responding that “No matter; it will.” Goodman probably is referring to a passage in Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, loc. 136: “After a little while I murmured to Picasso that I liked his portrait of Gertrude Stein. Yes, he said, everybody says that she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will, he said.”
- <sup>5</sup> It is important to keep in mind what Goodman means by *understanding*. Giovannelli offers that “*Understanding* is, for Goodman, a broader concept than knowledge, one that is not bound by literal truth, and that is thus applicable also to the literally false and to what admits of no truth value: metaphors and paintings, for example” AG, SEC: sec. 4.6.
- <sup>6</sup> Peirce conveys this similarly in his writings on semiotics, in defining “copy” in his tripartite separation of copies, indexes, and symbols, asserting that *copy* describes something without referring to it.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Denis Dutton’s argument of intrinsic artistic predilections.
- <sup>8</sup> Note that all five conditions, while strict, are not found in every system of notation. Language, for instance, is characterized by the omission of some of them. See sec. 6 of Cohnitz and Rossberg for a delineation of the conditions.
- <sup>9</sup> Goodman, 1972 review of Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*.

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# Acknowledging Separateness: Iris Murdoch and Richard Wollheim on Literature and Philosophy

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**Abstract:** This paper is a contribution to the debate on the relationship between literature and philosophy. It challenges Nussbaum's (1983) and Murphy's (2024) worries that philosophy doesn't deal adequately with morality, drawing on Richard Wollheim and Iris Murdoch. Instead of finding in a more literary writing (Nussbaum) or in the concept of 'bifocality' (Murphy) the solution to philosophy's limits, it resorts to Wollheim's idea of 'commentary' and to Murdoch's uses of literary examples to argue for a distinction between literature and philosophy. It further shows that such separateness enables a vital dialectical exchange between the two fields.

**Keywords:** Iris Murdoch, Richard Wollheim, literature, philosophy

## Introduction

In the 1983 first issue of the journal *New Literary History*, a significant discussion took place on the relationship between literature and moral philosophy, involving both literary scholars and contemporary philosophers. The central piece of the volume, around which much of the discussion revolved, was Martha Nussbaum's "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy" (Nussbaum, 1983). Recently, this debate has gained renewed interest thanks to Ruth Murphy's article, published in the *Winter Issue* of 2024 in the same journal, titled "'Let me look again'. The Moral Philosophy and Literature Debate at 40" (Murphy, 2024). We think that Murphy's article stands out for at least three reasons. First, it provides a concise yet insightful summary of key moments in a debate that might otherwise seem dated, clarifying the positions of its protagonists. It also refers to other subsequent moments where the relationship between literature and moral philosophy was explored in Anglo-American journals. Second, it explicitly inserts Iris Murdoch into the discussion. While Murdoch was briefly mentioned by Nussbaum in a footnote of "Flawed Crystals"—and integrated only in Cora Diamond's article for the same issue of *New Literary History* (Diamond, 1983)—Murphy takes this suggestion further, treating Murdoch as a fundamental voice in the debate. This innovative move is something we also aim to revisit in our article. Lastly, it develops the concept of "bifocality" to articulate the connection between literature and moral philosophy. By "bifocality," Murphy refers to a dual perspective that characterizes certain genres, particularly written testimonies, and that reconciles philosophy and literature. As a paradigmatic example, Murphy analyzes *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi, showing how it can be both considered a literary work and a text of moral philosophy.

While recognizing its merits, we also believe Murphy's article does not address certain key aspects of the 1983 debate, particularly Richard Wollheim's objection to the overall plausibility of considering literature as moral philosophy. What worries Murphy is finding a way to bring literature and philosophy closer, against those who believe such a rapprochement is structurally impossible (like,

for instance, Paul Voice in his article “Why Literature Cannot Be Moral Philosophy”; see Voice, 1994, and Murphy, 2024). Now, Wollheim’s reply to Nussbaum is subtler than limiting to say that literature simply is not and never will be moral philosophy. We believe that his position shows well not just the distance but also the possible interpenetration between literature and philosophy. Confronting this duality—which can be expressed in many ways, as Murphy also recalls: i.e. concrete and abstract, near and far, particular and universal—Wollheim is not so worried. He tones it down. He shows us how it is possible for these two fields to interact while maintaining their differences, without necessarily trying to unite them—or to identify particular literary styles or genres that merge them. What is more, we believe that Iris Murdoch, at least in part, shared this attitude. Her philosophical work can be interpreted not only as an expression of bifocality, but also as exhibiting a serene acceptance of the separation between philosophy and literature. A separation neither dramatic nor tragic, but necessary to make the two fields interact fruitfully.

In our article, we will begin in Section 1 by recounting the origins of the 1983 volume of the *New Literary History*, recalling how it is an extension of the debate held in 1981 at a meeting of the *American Philosophical Association* dedicated to “Philosophy and Literature,” at which Martha Nussbaum presented her paper on Henry James. In the course of this section, we will investigate Nussbaum’s concern about the possible unification of philosophy and literature and then we will see, in the final part, how Murphy took up that concern and attempted to solve it through the concept of “bifocality” and resorting to Murdoch’s conceptions of attention and “fabric of being.”

In Section 2, we will reconstruct Wollheim’s critique of Nussbaum, and we will see how Wollheim reflects on the value of the commentary: rather unsurprisingly, philosophy can fruitfully engage with literature by commenting on it. This does not mean that philosophy will use literature merely as a large repository of examples, but rather that philosophy can integrate its reflections by allowing itself to be dialectically influenced by literature. Indeed, philosophy can extrapolate certain questions from literary texts and then attempt to answer them, without knowing in advance which questions and what answers—moral or otherwise—may emerge. This shift of attention aims to show a way in which philosophy can maintain a certain distance without rejecting its intermingling with literature. Finally, we will close this section by showing how an analogous philosophical outline—rooted in commentary and in fruitful collaboration between philosophical reflection and literary sources—can be found in Iris Murdoch as well. Murdoch has many times focused on how philosophy, including moral philosophy, can be contaminated by literature, without, in doing so, becoming like literature or adopting a double (or bifocal) perspective. Here too, we see a dialectical movement aimed at finding new questions in literary texts and then attempting to remain with them, to answer them in a philosophical way. This process involves an attention to determinate questions with a philosophical interest, which can guide us through the richness of the literary works under examination.

## I

From March 26th to 28th, 1981, the 55th annual meeting of the *American Philosophical Association* takes place in Portland, Oregon. In the program for Thursday, March 26th, 1981, under the “Invited Addresses,” we find a session entitled “Philosophy and Literature.” The speaker is Martha Nussbaum, the commentators are Richard Wollheim and Guy Sircello, and the chair is Arnulf Zweig. Nussbaum is 33 years old and has been teaching at Harvard University since 1975. In a 2008 interview with Jeffrey J. Williams, Nussbaum reveals that it was thanks to a co-taught course with Stanley Cavell that she discovered a way of teaching that resonated with her:

Cavell communicated the idea that when you go into that classroom in front of five hundred undergraduates who don’t care about Plato’s *Symposium*, you have to dig into yourself and figure out what’s really important to you about Plato’s *Symposium*, because it’s only if you do that that you’ll have any hope of getting to them. I just thought one night, What do I really care about? (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 73).

What is interesting is that, in 1975, Nussbaum doesn't have a clear answer to this question. What she realizes instead, interrogating her own interests, is that she wants to force herself to teach at least one "non-philosophical" course a year. Hence she opts for a course entitled "Philosophy and the Novel." Since then she begins working on "the Henry James stuff" (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 74), which will eventually appear in *Love's Knowledge* (Nussbaum, 1990). It is 1981, however, the fundamental year for the development of this new, "non-philosophical" interest. Let us read Nussbaum's own recounting:

The American Philosophical Association asked me to give one of what they call 'invited papers.' They said it could be anything you want, so I thought, Okay, so far I've been known as a classical philosopher—the *De Motu* book had come out, parts of *The Fragility of Goodness* were circulating, but if I'm ever going to strike out and establish that I think about a wider range of texts and issues, now's the time to do it. I'd been lecturing on Henry James in the class, so I thought, Alright, I'm going to do a paper on *The Golden Bowl* (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 74).

We decided to quote a few excerpts from this interview (which we will reference again) because, before reporting some of the main points of the theoretical position put forward by Nussbaum in "Flawed Crystal: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," it is good to grasp the scope she herself assigned to this undertaking. Her article is conceived as a challenge to an academic philosophical community that regarded an interest in Henry James, and in literature more broadly, as "non-philosophical."

Nussbaum seizes the opportunity and presents her reading of *The Golden Bowl*. At the time, her attempt to read the novel is certainly subversive in its form—indeed, in the same interview, Nussbaum admits that if she had written her dissertation with the same "poetic voice," she would never have gotten a job (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 73); as it was just as subversive in its content, since it urged her contemporaries not merely to take literature seriously (which they certainly did outside the university), but to take it seriously *within* the academic sphere: the goal was to no longer see literature as merely a "sort of orchard full of juicy examples" (Adamson, 1998, p. 89, and see Murphy, 2024) for philosophy—especially moral philosophy—but rather as an integral part of the philosophical enterprise. In what sense? As Nussbaum explains in 2009, the issues raised by "Flawed Crystals" can be summarized as follows:

The first [issue] concerns the need for moral philosophy to recognize ways of thinking and imagining that do not focus exclusively on general principles. My own turn to James was part of a defense of an Aristotelian perception-based approach in ethics, and my claim was that we cannot see what such an approach offers ... without detailed investigations of the role of perception and particular vision in individual lives. Philosophical articles cannot, all by themselves, offer us such investigations, although they can helpfully comment on them. Novels such as the novels of Henry James are such investigations. Their form ... is not incidental, but essential to their ethical contribution. For that reason ... no work in the form of a philosophical treatise could make a complete statement of the case for Aristotelian perception-centered ethics (Nussbaum, 2009, p. 762).

One interesting aspect of the reconstruction Nussbaum provides of the central moments of "Flawed Crystals" is that she acknowledges both a limitation and an impossibility within philosophy: a limitation, because moral philosophy needs to turn to something beyond general principles, or else it risks being disconnected from human life; an impossibility, because what Nussbaum here calls "the philosophical treatise" can never fully succeed in defending the perception-based ethics derived from literary works (such as Henry James's). How, then, does Nussbaum attempt this task in "Flawed Crystals," even knowing that she cannot fully carry it out? By using a philosophical writing style that is permeated by James's prose—a style that, we might say, imitates it, seeking to capture certain aspects of its way of proceeding. In particular, Nussbaum lingers on the second part of the novel, devoted to Maggie Verver and her plan to win back her husband: first James and then Nussbaum present this plan in all its nuances and complexity; following first one then the other, the reader is invited to expand their own "moral imagination."



The exercise in style Nussbaum did 40 years ago could be revisited, according to Ruth Murphy, through the concept of “bifocality.” From the very outset of “‘*Let me look again*’. The Moral Philosophy and Literature Debate at 40” Murphy introduces the concept of “bifocality” as “a style of writing that responds to the moral demands of a lived reality in both a philosophical and literary way” (Murphy, 2024, p. 21). It would be a way to resolve both the “far-sightedness” of philosophy, in “in its dissociation from lived experience,” and the “near-sightedness” of literature, “in its attachment to it” (Murphy, 2024, p. 26). She thinks that it is in particular in testimonies—understood both as a literary genre and as a discursive category—that we can achieve this kind of double vision. Why? “Because testimony incorporates both the literary and the ethical, and precisely through and from this convergence derives its moral charge” (Murphy, 2024, p. 27). In testimony we have thus the merging of the literary and the ethical (that is, the philosophical part: philosophical ethics).

Even though testimonies are Murphy’s elected genre or category for seeing bifocality in action, we claim that the spirit of bifocality—or, at least, the spirit of its introduction as a concept at all—is also to be found in Martha Nussbaum’s attempt to bridge philosophy and literature. However, Nussbaum’s writing would be an approximation of bifocality, or rather, bifocal only in its form, as also Iris Murdoch’s writing in *The Sovereignty of Good*, according to Murphy, is. Indeed, much of the former’s writing is resting on fiction (Nussbaum, 1983), and of the latter on thought experiments (Murdoch, 1970), rather than on personal experience, directly or indirectly (Murphy’s relevant example here is Hannah Arendt’s documentation of Adolf Eichmann’s trial). This is how the distinction between form and content in “bifocality” is framed:

Bifocality tends to encompass both form and content. Content can be deemed bifocal when it draws on both a particular historical event and on the conception of this event as a moral breach in a collective ethical sphere. Form is bifocal when it combines elements of literary and philosophical languages to derive an ethical message. That the characteristics of literature can ethically enrich philosophy has already been shown by Murdoch, Nussbaum, and many others (Murphy, 2024, p. 33).

Both Nussbaum’s and Murdoch’s works (“and many others,” including Cora Diamond’s), for Murphy, exhibit bifocality in their form, but they would also go some way to underpinning a bifocal framework as such. Specifically, the resonances Murphy sees between Murdoch’s work (she is Murphy’s main philosophical interlocutor in her essay) and a bifocal framework are (a) Murdoch’s emphasis on the notion of attention as a way of “staying with” a given reality, “an act that involves ‘looking again, with the distance of space and time’” (Murphy, 2024, p. 33), and (b) the relevance of the notion of the “fabric of being,” which Murdoch brings into philosophy for referring to the constitution of our moral lives (Murdoch, 1970, pp. 21–22). What the M and D example in *The Sovereignty of the Good* shows—in describing how a mother, M, changes her negative view into a positive view of her daughter-in-law, D—is that the ethical transformation takes place when M pays attention to the modes of existence of D: the change is internal, it happens within the intricate “fabric of being” of M, and it involves the re-direction of attention towards D.

“Fabric of being” is thus a metaphor Murdoch employs to describe the complex internal processes that are at play in our moral life. Processes that, for Murdoch, should deserve our deepest attention. Attention is another central concept to Murdoch’s understanding of morality which she inherits from Simone Weil. In *The Idea of Perfection*, Murdoch defines attention as expressing “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 33), and takes it to be the characteristic trait of a moral agent. For to pay attention, in a Murdochian framework, is to acknowledge the true reality object of attention, that is, it is to see the object without imposing an egoistic and self-referred view on it. Through attentive looking, the subject gets rid of its “fat relentless ego” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 52) and thus is able to fully and realistically appreciate what stands in front of it. It is for instance only when M “looks again” that she realises who D is—and perhaps also learns something else about herself too: moral change happens internally through attention. (Murdoch, still after Weil, calls this process *unselfing*: in *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts*, it is

described as the action of giving “attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 82); in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, unselfing is explained from the perspective of the lover who “learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 17)).

The relevance of attention within a bifocal framework is further cashed out by Murphy through a parallel with Primo Levi’s notion of the “gray zone,” which indicates the range of situations in which it is not possible to give a definitive moral evaluation (Levi, 1986). This is because these intermediate moments—between the black of total evil and the white of total good—call for what Murdoch referred to as “secondary moral words” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 22; see also Williams, 1985) like courage, resentment, envy, love: they bring complexity in assessing our reality, oftentimes leading to the practice of attention as the only possible moral resolution. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi gives an example of this kind of dynamic which is centered on the feelings of shame: as a concentration camp prisoner, he found a liter of water and, after painfully pondering different scenarios (i.e., to drink the water all by himself, to share it with a close friend, to tell the discovery to every prisoner), he decided to reveal it only to his friend Alberto. Levi later discussed his decision with another fellow friend and prisoner, Daniele, who ended up knowing what he did, and he couldn’t help but feel shame. Levi dealt with shame even many years after the deportation, in a situation of peace, and even after the death of Daniele. The only thing that Levi could do, and did, for all that time, as the writing of *The Drowned and the Saved* testifies, was to keep interrogating his actions and the systems of value through which we judge them, showing a deep form of attention to them.

Thus, the practice of attention, if we take Murphy’s reading of Murdoch, is connected to Levi’s “gray zone” because they are both linked with a specific “domain of subtleties and struggle” (Murphy, 2024, p. 41), while, more in general, encouraging the exercise of the moral imagination. It is at this juncture that literature and philosophy are portrayed as necessary conditions for bifocality. Following Murphy, literature is, unlike philosophy, able to grasp the nuances of everyday life (the Murdochian “fabric of being”), even though it risks getting lost in them. But philosophy, unlike literature, is able to deal with reality at a distance (Murphy, 2024, p. 26), in abstraction, at a general level. Combining both literature and philosophy, bifocal writing (expressed, for instance, in the form of “Flawed Crystals” and the M and D example, and in the form and content of *The Drowned and the Saved*) brings together universality and particularity, abstractness and concreteness, distance and proximity.

What we would like to question now is this very strive for unity: do we always need to worry about the limits and separateness of literature and (a certain kind of) philosophy? Isn’t there also another way of engaging with both fields that doesn’t even try to merge them?

## II

We argue that there is another way. Even though it is a way that does not spring from worries or concerns, but rather from toning down the fact of the separation between literature and philosophy. However, it tames it without throwing away the interest in this discussion. We don’t know how Martha Nussbaum’s presentation on James was received in 1981 session; she doesn’t talk about the questions from the commentator Guy Sircello and the chair Arnulf Zweig (in her interview, she only mentions a very long question by the philosopher and logician Ruth Barcan Marcus, Nussbaum, 2009, p. 760). Instead, she focuses on the role of the other commentator, Richard Wollheim. We think that the spirit and the letter of Wollheim’s reply is able to achieve this undramatic but sympathetic response to the separateness of literature and philosophy and we aim to explain why in the course of this section.

However, let us read directly from what Nussbaum recalls of their exchange in the APA meeting:

Luckily, the commentator was ... Richard Wollheim ... a very great philosopher but also a kind of renegade character, with an autobiographical novel that talks about things like his love affairs and his divorce. Wollheim had a very different view of *The Golden Bowl* from mine, but he took the whole project of bringing these novels into philosophy seriously. Instead of just being standoffish, skeptical,

or scoffing, as so many people would have been, he got right into it, and he put himself on the line. He said, 'Maggie Verver is not an example of the moral imagination; she's possessive; she's a predator'—things that I now think are true, but I didn't think so at the time. We had a wonderful exchange (J.J. Williams, 2009, p. 74).

After that session, the editor of *New Literary History*, Ralph Cohen, becomes interested in that exchange and decides to publish it in the journal in 1983, also involving other philosophers such as Cora Diamond, Patrick Gardiner, and Hilary Putnam. In recalling this 1983 issue of *New Literary History*, Ruth Murphy, in her article, makes no reference either to Wollheim's role in the story or to his critique of Nussbaum's presentation. We can thus proceed to analyze the disagreement between the two—a disagreement that, let us emphasise, arose within a shared framework of sympathy for the endeavor of bringing moral philosophy and literature together. Their shared sympathy did not prevent criticisms, but rather encouraged them (provided they were not "standoffish or scoffing"), especially when they are motivated by a profound and engaged reading of *The Golden Bowl* such as Wollheim's—a reading that Nussbaum herself, as she revealed in her 2008 interview, came to accept in part and, in 2009, even characterized as "in many ways superior to my own" (Nussbaum, 2009, p. 759).

Wollheim's response, which was published in the 1983 issue of *New Literary History*, is entitled "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and the Plausibility of Literature as Moral Philosophy." Perhaps it is not so strange that it is the only text in the volume whose title closely resembles Nussbaum's title: the words remain the same up to "and," then Wollheim introduces a modification; as though signaling that both texts arrive at different conclusions from the same material, the same flawed golden bowl.

From the very beginning of his article, Wollheim expresses a certain difficulty: on the one hand, he considers it inadequate to emphasize uniquely the areas of disagreement with Nussbaum; on the other hand, he thinks that presenting his own interpretation of *The Golden Bowl* together with something like "a general theory of the novel," while also responding to Nussbaum's issues, would not be feasible. Wollheim's solution to this impasse—drawing the Freudian lesson for the theory of the mind—is to "resort to compromise" (Wollheim, 1983, p. 185). In his brief reply, he confines himself to three things: (1) putting together a few interpretive observations about *The Golden Bowl*; (2) connecting them to a "highly schematic picture of the novel"; and (3) showing how these observations can be useful to moral philosophy. (In truth, Wollheim also alludes to a fourth thing, which he doesn't develop and is not relevant for this paper, since it refers to a more general theory of expressiveness.)

Wollheim's text is already highly condensed and schematic, so it is very difficult to compress it further without sacrificing intelligibility. Nevertheless, what we deem essential is that Wollheim offers a reading of *The Golden Bowl* that directly contrasts with Nussbaum's. Let us firstly resume very briefly the scheme of the novel. *The Golden Bowl* is divided in two parts: in the first, we see the marriage of two couples, the Prince or Amerigo and Maggie Verver, Charlotte Stant and Adam Verver (Maggie's father); in the second part, we see how Maggie succeeds in pushing away Charlotte from her and her father's lives once she discovers that Charlotte and the Prince were having, in the first half of the novel, an extramarital affair they both valued and saw as extraordinary—yet thought to be viable with their respective marriages.

Commenting on the second part of *The Golden Bowl*, Wollheim writes: "In reclaiming her husband, Maggie seeks revenge upon his mistress, and the retribution that she exacts is in accord with what we may think of as the law of primal sadism: the *lex talionis*" (Wollheim, 1983, p. 189). But how does he arrive at this interpretation? By reading *The Golden Bowl* step by step and, above all, through a dialectical process that sees the text first as Story, then as Narrative, and finally as Fiction. These are Wollheim's highly schematic terms of art. In his view, each phase elicits different reactions.

Let us begin with the possible reactions triggered by the stories in *The Golden Bowl*. One central story is the extramarital relationship between the Prince and Charlotte Stant. This relationship can

be regarded as incompatible with the marriage between the Prince and Maggie (as the character Fanny Assingham believes), or it can be seen as wholly compatible with it—something that even arises to compensate for certain shortcomings in marriage itself (as the Prince and Charlotte believe in the first part of the novel). Which stance should we adopt? According to Wollheim, neither. Because it would be premature to settle for this level of interpretation. One must transcend the simple Story, move to the Narrative and make a “shift of attention,” mobilizing the imagination. By doing so

Our viewpoint changes: we identify now with one character, now with another... Accordingly, the novel as Narrative is similarly able to recruit identification in the reading of the text, and it therefore seems that the only responses that we should take account of are those which have been enriched in this way (Wollheim, 1983, pp. 186-187).

What kinds of reactions emerge when we view the text not merely as Story but as Narrative? To put it briefly, during our reading we let our imagination roam free: first we identify with one character, then with another, as the Narrative unfolds—sometimes with Maggie’s plan, sometimes with the Prince’s perspective, sometimes with Charlotte’s exuberance, and so on.

Yet Wollheim argues that we must transcend the text as Narrative and move toward viewing it as Fiction. In a nutshell, we must not overlook the fact that these various identifications are in some sense “constrained by [the author’s] intention” (Wollheim, 1983, p. 188). And it is at this level that, for Wollheim, the most interesting questions arise: “[Now] we might ask why James insists that we don’t identify with Charlotte in the course of assessing Maggie. Is it simply that he wishes to protect or exculpate his heroine?” (Wollheim, 1983, p. 188). This is the fundamental question worth asking, and one that James, as a novelist, appears to want us to ask. And it is again at this level that Nussbaum’s and Wollheim’s answers diverge: the former seems to say, “Yes, in assessing Maggie, it is crucial not to consider Charlotte’s point of view—however painful that may be. This avoidance is necessary for Maggie’s liberation, for separating herself from the image of being the perfect, good (but unloved) wife and a good daughter.” The latter, however, interprets Maggie’s plan as a revenge against Charlotte, a person who has committed a double crime against her: “Charlotte took something away from her that belonged to her—that Maggie can right by taking it back. And Charlotte did so by exploiting Maggie’s innocence. She deprived Maggie of knowledge, she immured her in her ignorance” (Wollheim, 1983, p. 189). For Wollheim, we can thus read Maggie’s plan as a genuine vendetta, with all its darker sides:

Maggie pursues her revenge by deepening the silence until finally the distraught Charlotte, mocked by her torturer, hallucinates triumph, and the Prince, in the comfort of his own little prison, pronounces the woman whose company he had once, and not so long before, preferred to anyone else’s, ‘stupid’ (Wollheim, 1983, p. 189).

That covers the first two points of Wollheim’s response (pertaining to his interpretation of *The Golden Bowl* and the “highly schematic picture of the novel”). In the final part of his reply, Wollheim addresses how these preliminary observations about literature in general, and a novel like *The Golden Bowl* in particular, can be helpful to moral philosophy. For the aims of this paper, we are not especially interested in Wollheim’s view of the formation and development of morality (for an in-depth look, see Wollheim, 1984). We are interested in drawing attention to a crucial aspect that any moral philosophy must confront if it wishes to learn from literature. According to Wollheim, any text of moral philosophy must necessarily offer a commentary on the literary work under analysis; and such commentary must take into account the “highly schematic picture of the novel” and remain somewhat faithful to the author’s intentions. Wollheim writes: “it seems to me that the most powerful considerations for thinking that literature is an essential element in the formulation of moral philosophy also show how crucial it is to have the commentary as well” (Wollheim, 1983, p. 190).

What does this fact imply? Certainly, it implies that a literary text does not speak on its own and that, no matter how we might encourage a rapprochement of literature and philosophy, it will inevitably require a mediation. Does this mean that Nussbaum's original interpretation in *Flawed Crystals* is invalidated? Not at all. Her reading serves as a commentary, drawing on certain elements of James's text (above all, the gradual effacement of Charlotte) and interpreting them in the way most congenial to her. Wollheim extracted the following question from James's novel: "[Now] we might ask why James insists that we don't identify with Charlotte in the course of assessing Maggie. Is it simply that he wishes to protect or exculpate his heroine?". The question remains alive, it is Nussbaum's and Wollheim's respective answers (at least in the 1980s) that differ.

This fact underscores a very general characteristic that can help distinguish literature from philosophy: in literary texts such as novels—and, more specifically, in *The Golden Bowl*—certain questions are raised (for instance, "Is Charlotte Stant abandoned?"). Henry James does not explicitly answer this question (nor does he explicitly formulate it); in his text, however, one can extract elements that support either a more positive response (like Nussbaum's, which claims that Charlotte is indeed abandoned but is nevertheless taken into account in Maggie's thoughts) or a more negative one (putting an emphasis on how Charlotte is not only forgotten but also punished). What is more, the interesting fact is that the philosophical game thrives on the neatness of such answers: without Nussbaum's initial *Flawed Crystals*, Wollheim's subsequent *Flawed Crystals* might never have existed. The contradiction, as in a dialectical process, stimulates philosophy; while it remains contained and implicit within the literary work itself.

This is by no means to say that literature can never speak for itself and that philosophy must come to rescue commenting on it. What we can learn from Wollheim's reply is that philosophy, in its commentary, cannot think of itself as the ventriloquist of the literary work, just like that, immediately, but must as it were lay its card on the table: that is, philosophy must admit that it will start from its own interpretation or commentary. It follows that different comments will conflict with each other, as philosophy doesn't always start from the same assumptions. Anyway, what Wollheim makes us see is that this (the conflict) is not something we have to worry about, as long as the dialogue between differences is constructive.

Perhaps surprisingly, given Murphy's reliance on Iris Murdoch, we would like to put forth the idea that Murdoch too doesn't always have the urge to find a resolution between literature and philosophy. Rather, there are some resonances with Wollheim's understanding of philosophy as a commentary and as a re-orientation of attention. In this way, a different scruple entertained by Murdoch would concern the maintenance of the dialogue between literature and philosophy, rather than finding a genre or a style of writing which combines the strengths of both.

We can start by asking: how does Murdoch interrogate literary works? A first example is to be found in this passage from the paper "Art is the Imitation of Nature" delivered in 1978 at a symposium on British writing at the University of Caen and collected in *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997):

What do we think about Hamlet? What do we think about Fabrice del Dongo, or Madame Bovary? Or what about D. H. Lawrence's treatment of Clifford Chatterley compared with his treatment of Mellors? Does Tolstoy meanly abandon characters such as Sonia and Karenin? Does Henry James abandon Charlotte Stant? Here, I think, we naturally envisage a relation between the author and his character as if the character could turn round and say to the author, 'You have been unfair to me.' Can Mauriac get away with a character as incoherent as that of his Thérèse? Is Fanny Price in Mansfield Park really a rather nasty girl or is she a nice girl? We believe that Swann loved Odette but do we believe in the same way that Marcel loved Albertine? *As a method of criticism such speculations may seem simple-minded and perhaps old-fashioned, but this is the natural beginning of criticism.* This sort of natural reflection about stories and about novels can reveal to us how clearly the author's moral attitude is exhibited, even if he wishes to conceal it, in his attitude to his characters, in what some critics call 'the placing' of his characters (Murdoch, 1997, p. 254, our emphasis).



Here Murdoch does something similar to what Wollheim did in replying to Nussbaum: extracting questions from the novel considered as fiction. Other occurrences where Murdoch raises similar questions can be found in, for instance, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), where Murdoch reports, agreeing with it, Simone Weil's criticism of Mauriac's novel *Thérèse Desqueyroux* "for its failure to portray evil justly." The problem there is that the author didn't show how far goodness and self-deception really are—that is, he didn't properly represent the relation between sin and grace, turning it into something "sloppy and sentimental" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 103). Or when, in objecting against the structuralist turn in literary criticism, she remarks that "people argue about whether D. H. Lawrence was unjust to Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and how far this affects our judgment of the work; or about whether the hero of Henry James' *Ambassadors* as a righteous man or a self-deceiving fool" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 205). It is true that for Murdoch such questions are only picturing what morality is in a partial way: asking about obligations and rules isn't enough in grasping the facts of morality, which for her encompass aspects of vision and of inner change. However, posing such questions "is the natural beginning of criticism," and the criticism might not be the one that the literary works immediately seem to call for. At the same time, Murdoch also reminds us that a "prime difficulty in human life" is that "we must have stories (art forms), but stories (art forms) are almost always a bit or very false" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 105). If we listen to both Murdoch and Wollheim, the beginning of an answer to such difficulty can be given by philosophy: what do we have to pay attention to?

What we would like to suggest is a shift of emphasis: it is true that Murdoch advocates for a philosophy able to speak meaningfully of our everyday experience and to deal with our "fabric of being." This is not to say, however, that philosophy should have the same function as literature. Indeed, Murdoch uses the comparison with the ways in which literature manages to grasp our complexity to illuminate the faults of *certain philosophical approaches*. For instance, in the sixth chapter of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, "Consciousness and Thought I," Murdoch explores different ways of conceptualising the notion of "the self." There she shows a general contrast between some philosophers' accounts of it and its "ordinary-language meaning." Murdoch finds faults in how philosophy describes the self, reporting a lack of reference to everyday experience, thus leading philosophical systems astray from a truthful investigation on reality. Where philosophical pictures fail, Murdoch says, novels manage to take seriously "personal morality in a non-abstract manner as the stuff of consciousness" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 169).

The novel Murdoch takes as an example is *The Golden Bowl*, specifically the passage where Maggie comes to the realisation that the Prince, her husband, is, and has been for a while, romantically entangled with Charlotte, an old friend of hers and recently also her father's wife. What Murdoch highlights is that we understand the description James gives of Maggie's internal reckoning because our "fabric of being" is *like* it. However, what is most striking of Murdoch's use of this passage is her reason for bringing it into her argument: "Problems are set up in philosophy with ulterior motives. I want there to be a discussable problem of consciousness because I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 171). Murdoch's interest here doesn't have to do with making philosophy like literature, that is, with diminishing the distance between the two. In other words, Murdoch doesn't seem to be concerned with philosophy being different from literature. The point for her is, rather, to have a more realistic philosophical picture of the self, so that (her) philosophy can work better. It is certainly a problem worth discussing, for Murdoch, whether a certain conception of the self (like the ones Hume, Husserl or Sartre, among others, propose) is to be entertained; still, it remains a problem to be discussed in the field of philosophy. Murdoch's critique of philosophy, which at times figures as the denouncement of the lack of a proper conception of the self (i.e., Murdoch, 1992, Chapter 6), is not necessarily an allegation against its abstractness, or distance from particulars. Indeed, philosophy was described by Murdoch as a "two-way movement" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 1) between empiricism and metaphysics, where abstrac-



tion and distance play an important role both in the “piecemeal analysis, modesty and common-sense” (what she calls, rather idiosyncratically, “empiricism”; Murdoch, 1992, p. 211) and in the creation for theoretical syntheses and “lofty and intricate structures” (what she calls “metaphysics”; Murdoch, 1992, p. 211).

However, if even Murdoch, in the end, takes a literary example to respond to a philosophical problem (in this case, the workings of consciousness), are we then back to the idea of literature as a “sort of orchard full of juicy examples” that philosophy can use at its discretion? Not really. It is true that in the Murdochian “two-way movement” there is no talking of the role of literature, and this fact could give the misleading impression that philosophy could make sense of things and then search for the right example, or illustration. But for Murdoch this is wrong. The way James writes about the self is more realistic than, e.g., Husserl (Murdoch, 1992). But this does not mean that only in literature, or in a literary philosophy, we could ever aspire to talk about such things. The point Murdoch seems to make is different from Nussbaum’s “Flawed Crystals”: philosophy—even when it wants to achieve a more realistic picture of the self, or of moral concepts—doesn’t always and necessarily need to merge with literature. That is: Nussbaum’s worry about philosophy’s inability to go beyond the general principles is already softened by Murdoch’s understanding of philosophy as dialectically articulated. In a sense, here Murdoch reminds us that philosophy doesn’t have to do everything: it has its limits and only when acknowledging them it can dialogue with literature.

Murdoch—this other Murdoch at least—seems rather to go in the direction of Wollheim’s focus on the centrality of the commentary. Philosophy can elicit important aspects, such as implicit assumptions, of one’s discourse, especially in relation with literature: literary works lead the philosophers to asking new questions, to finding answers to such questions, and to contesting other’s answers to the same questions. This game is not played in order to achieve only a better comprehension of the literary work under examination: philosophers can often make us look in different directions (*their* direction, e.g., “I want there to be a discussable problem of consciousness because I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being”), thus orienting our lingering in a literary work through the lenses of a specific philosophical discussion.

But this fact does not mean that the literary work becomes just an excuse for this very philosophical discussion, or becomes something that is treated instrumentally, without a respect of its own inner workings and rules. The discussion is yes philosophical—it tries to deliver answers to questions, moral or otherwise, extrapolated from e.g., a novel—but it would not be possible without letting the novel be exactly as it is, without letting it unfold as it was structured by its own author to unfold. Thus the spirit of our article can be condensed in a very simple reminder: the philosophical questions and answers would not be possible if the contamination with the literary enterprise becomes too strong, or too radical: the dialectic between the specific philosophical interest (that it is to emerge from the neatness of a philosophical question and answer) and the literary source would cease to exist, or become unrecognizable. We would lose something that is valuable, even if not that exciting, when refusing to acknowledge the separateness of philosophy and literature.

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### Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a postdoctoral research project at the University of Turin, PRIN 2022 (Unione Europea – Next Generation EU, MIUR – Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca), with the title “Towards the History of a Heterodox Tradition in Analytic Philosophy: Transformative, Humanistic, Conversational” (Prot. 2022XS25NZ), and by FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P. with the scholarship UI/ BD/ 154631/2023 and in the scope of project UIDB/UIDP00310/2020 with DOI identifier 10.54499/UIDB/00310/2020.

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# The Quest for the Knowable and Symbolic Transgression in Camões' *The Lusiads*

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**Abstract:** Luís Vaz de Camões' epic poem *The Lusiads* dedicated to the voyage of Vasco da Gama to India may be seen as a mark of the closure of the expansive period of Portuguese cultural history. Read as an epic of knowledge, *The Lusiads* celebrate symbolic transgression and the transformation of the culturally defined scheme of global space as its central point shifts away from Jerusalem and the mobilising project of the Crusades. The poem speaks of the trauma of transgression and the endeavour of completing the creation of the world, initiated and left uncompleted by God. This is why its meaning is analysed in terms of spiritual adventure. The maritime voyage realizes the paradigm of universal conjunction, establishing unity situated on the mystical plane.

**Keywords:** Transgression, epic poetry, *The Lusiads*, globalization, knowledge

## The Presentment of an End

Although it thematises the auroral moments of the discovery of the maritime passage to India, *The Lusiads* should be read as a text of a twilight. Camões's masterpiece narrating Vasco da Gama's voyage from Europe to India is obviously a glance back: the poem published in 1572 refers to the events that took place during a voyage that lasted from 1497 to 1499. Situated in relation to the historical process of Portuguese maritime discoveries, the work of the epic poet is a conclusion, the result of an intellectual processing of the experiences of an entire era, roughly covering over a century and a half (if we count it since the beginnings of the maritime exploration in the first half of the fifteenth century). Marking not the beginning but the end of the greatest period of Portuguese maritime adventure, *The Lusiads* is tainted with a melancholic awareness of shortcomings and chances lost, haunted by the presentment of an end. Arguably, such a historical ending actually happened at the moment of the childless death of D. Sebastião which brought about a dynastic crisis. What is more, the mysterious disappearance of the king during the battle of Alcácer-Quibir in Morocco created a fertile ground for the surge of legends and millenarian prophetism resumed under the term 'Sebastianism'. It pushed the Portuguese out of the pragmatic and experimental vein of the maritime expansion into a phantasmal mood of existence. Portuguese life went on not just under the yoke of the Castilian dynasty but, even more importantly, under the Inquisition stifling the impetus of intellectual and ideological revolutions brought about by the maritime discoveries.

On the other hand, the aura of an end in *The Lusiads* may also be seen as inherent to the epic genre. As Frank Kermode wrote in a classical essay, *The Sense of an Ending*, the progress of Aeneas may be resumed as a passage from a broken city to a new one, beyond any end, as Rome would stand for an eternal empire. It is thus close to the apocalyptic and millenarian scheme in which "ends are consonant with origins" and the episodes narrated "all exist under the shadow of the end."<sup>1</sup> Vasco da Gama narrating the origins of Portugal in his speech to the King of Melinde will strive to close the cycle, to see the end, as he will do while receiving his enlightenment on the mountain peak of the Island of Love. At the same time, one may feel that *The Lusiads*, rich in prophetic discourse—even if it is

repeatedly put in the mouth of an antique deity, Jove or Tethys—is a prefiguration of the millenarian thought of António Vieira transforming Portugal into the Fifth Empire, an eschatological state of peace and justice.

Luís Vaz de Camões, born around 1524, grew up in a society that was already profoundly transformed by maritime affairs. He was an experienced seafarer and soldier, a critical participant in various episodes of warfare accompanying the construction of the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*. His epic poem, created in the Far East, bears marks of this personal involvement and existential disenchantment. It was brought by the author back to the royal court in Lisbon and read before the young king D. Sebastião, in whose eyes, as it seems, the work did not gain high esteem. Nonetheless, from the first printed edition (1572) *The Lusiads* conquered a vast readership. The figure of Camões as the prince of national poets became particularly important during the period of Portugal's dependence on Castile (1580–1640) that followed the disaster of the battle of Alcácer-Quibir. Cultural peculiarity became a bulwark of autonomy under political dependence on the powerful neighbour. The life of the author became a legend—in parallel to the legend of the king—and the epic poem was revered as an everlasting testimony to the glory of Portugal. Although the country became dependent on a foreign political entity, the Portuguese continued to experience, at least at the level of collective imagination, the golden age of discoveries, reopening, over and over again, the gates of mythical India.

### The Incompleteness of the World

*The Lusiads*, however, became more than just a book of a nation. The work has been translated into several languages and has grown beyond the Portuguese context to constitute an important part of the global literary heritage.<sup>2</sup> The eulogy of Vasco da Gama and his discovery of the maritime passage to India overlaps a topic of timeless importance: the encompassing vision of human existential vocation understood as a commitment to knowledge. As it will be argued, such an epistemological endeavour comes before the commitments to empire and the expansive (either Crusader or missionary) understanding of religion. *The Lusiads* is an epic of cognitive achievement conditioned by symbolic transgression.

The concept of transgression appears more often in sociology and cultural analysis than in literary studies. The notion acquires diverse inflections in each of these disciplines. Speaking in this essay of symbolic transgression, I refer to the understanding of the term rooted in the tradition of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of culture, associated with the spatial metaphors of border-crossing between areas invested with peculiar qualities. In the third part of his seminal work *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, he stated that, in the process of knowledge, space is not just "a simple intuitive datum", but suffers a process of symbolic formation.<sup>3</sup> This symbolism implies the existence of opposites and polarised continua such as 'right'—'wrong', 'sacred'—'profane' as well as their spatial distribution. A symbolic transgression is always associated with and conditioned by a culturally determined system of values against which it is realized. The transgressor infringes not just a legal or social norm of behaviour but also more subtle cultural distinctions, such as the spatial distribution of the sacred and the profane. In this essay, the epic poem of Camões will be read as a narration of a transgressive story, built up on multiple inversions of values. In a significant switch of polarisations, the transgressors implicated in the shadow zone of wrong-doing and betrayal will emerge in the glory as discoverers and innovators modifying not only the map of sea routes but also the symbolic boundaries and distinctions concerning the axiomatic continuum 'valuable'—'worthless', 'legitimate'—'unjustified', and 'sacred'—'profane'.

Hans Blumenberg, another German philosopher and historian of ideas concerned with early-modern transformations, inquired, in the *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, about "absolute metaphors" that cannot be translated back into the strict, conceptual language. They play a crucial role in the evolution of human thought. One of those "absolute metaphors" is the concept of 'world', an intuitive, yet quite complex shorthand of the abstract notion of totality. The changing ways of concep-

tualizing this primary concept provided Blumenberg with keys to the early-modern evolution of culture which could be understood as a series of answers to the basic question 'what is the world?'. Blumenberg speaks of two such answers that may serve as keys for the understanding of the early-modern Portuguese culture: the 'world' is configured as a "terra incognita" and as an "incomplete universe". Both of them are rooted in the Portuguese collective experience of maritime discoveries: in the first place, the sea-faring expedition transcends the boundaries of the 'known world' that seemed to be stable and unchanging, and is *a posteriori* seen as covering only a small fraction of the reality. The other view conceptualises the universe as "analogous to a workpiece and draws from the newly emerging idea of evolutionary cosmogony the metaphorical conclusion that man is faced with the 'task' of bringing the workpiece to completion. 'Evolution' is transformed via the metaphor into a transitive idea: everything that nature has already effected becomes the framework for future human achievement."<sup>4</sup> The Portuguese maritime endeavour is seen as a human complement to the unfinished divine Creation.

### Beyond the Crusades

*The Lusiads* is profoundly engaged in the transcription of the early-modern geography of the sacred and the profane, striving to formulate a new answer to the general question concerning the organization of 'the world'. The normative code against which Camões stands up in his epic poem is rooted in the late-medieval imagination of chivalry and its Crusader duties. It presupposed a sacred geography with Jerusalem and the Holy Land at its centre. Certainly, Camões did not strive to obliterate the Crusades nullifying their value; the fight against the Muslims is still a leitmotif in *The Lusiads*. But repeatedly paying elaborate homage to chivalry in the narration of national history pronounced by Vasco da Gama before the ruler of Melinde and the Samorin of Calicut,<sup>5</sup> he strives to close it in the sphere of deeds already completed, like on a well-finished painting that Gama shows to the Indian visitor of his ship. Also, Camões appears to relegate the Crusade to the remote origins of the nation. Gama speaks of the conquest of Jerusalem in a *plusquamperfectum* referring to it as a long-gone circumstance in the life of Henrique, the ancestor of the first Portuguese king ("Já tinha vindo Anrique da conquista", etc. – Canto III, 27).<sup>6</sup> Yet somehow, the Crusade does not let itself be hemmed in a vision of the past. It slips out of historical narration to make its showy comeback as a rhetorical device in the vituperation against the European nations that fight among themselves rather than fulfilling their duties toward Christianity (Canto VII, 9). Even if *The Lusiads* is generally associated with "the growing recognition of Europe's coming role in a wider world"<sup>7</sup> at the dawn of the early-modern era, the opposite might also be argued: that the poem deplores the loneliness of the Portuguese on the seas and the lack of wider European participation in the maritime projects.

It is important to notice that the imaginary constellation of chivalrous ideal biographies and paradigms of self-realisation did not die with the end of the Middle Ages but remained valid as late as the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The very king to whom Camões dedicated his epic poem, D. Sebastião, with his projects of fighting the infidels in North Africa (materialised in the disastrous expedition to Morocco), was a man faithful to a cultural scheme that the new prospects of maritime expansion made obsolete. His obsession with male virginity and sexual reluctance may be explained in the light of the ultra-normative system of medieval chivalry, where the utmost prize, the discovery of the Grail, could be acquired only by a sexually pure knight. Such reasons, together with an extremely strict upbringing supervised by the Jesuit Luís Gonçalves, seem to have motivated or at least contributed to D. Sebastião's refusal of marriage, endangering the dynastic continuity of the Portuguese crown. This is why, as Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval puts it, Camões "will urge King Sebastian to 'see' the body of women as the key to Portugal's future."<sup>9</sup> Exploring the modalities of transgression, Camões strives to mediate the passage from an obsolete (the Crusades) to a novel collective venture, his "maritime modernity"<sup>10</sup> with all its consequences. He builds up a system of distribution of symbolic values to uphold a new social reality, already transformed by maritime activities.

What is more, he also creates another space of transgression beyond the construct legitimizing the maritime empire centred in India rather than the Holy Land. As I will argue below, Camões fosters a spiritual venture under the disguise of maritime journey. This transgressive quest for enlightenment appears as a flickering light in times of falling Inquisitorial darkness. Although the Crusader idea of expansive religion was about to be abandoned, the Iberian Peninsula effectively stepped on the threshold separating the expansive phase of spiritual freedom (early Renaissance and Humanism) from the phase of contraction under growing Inquisitorial control.

### The Trauma of Transgression

As we might see it, an individual act of transgression is hardly more than a misdemeanour. To acquire heroic proportions, to become an epic deed, the transgressive act must be accompanied by strenuous, sustained effort and self-denial. What is more, the heroic transgression must be transformative. It must gather a collective momentum, an amount of energy needed to crush the dominant system of values and to replace it with a new state of awareness, able to integrate new data and circumstances. Therefore, transgression and symbolic reconstruction are closely related and mutually conditional. The process of exploration is a transgressive-cognitive cycle, consisting of sustained refutation and reconstruction of hypotheses about reality. As the flow of collective experience solidifies in an epic vision, it draws new boundaries and distinctions, a new symbolic order.

The conquest of new knowledge requires more than patience and perseverance. It also implies meddling with the established notions of the sacred. This is why the venture of exploration implies a considerable spiritual cost. To achieve his discovery, Vasco da Gama and his crew must deny their faith, accepting the burden of guilt as they betray the truths constituting the foundation of the spiritual order of their time. They must willingly walk into a crisis that shakes the foundations of their universe. Their experience is thus marked by trauma, uncertainty, and remorse. No wonder that the solemn moment of departure of the armada is described by Camões in ambivalent terms. The procession of mariners accompanied by monks appears almost as a funerary conduct. Vasco da Gama and his crew see themselves cursed even before they have time to leave the port. Clearly, the expedition does not enjoy the support of their countrymen, and this is for more than one reason. At the most immediate level of collective mobilization, Gama's endeavour of reaching India appears as a betrayal of the Crusader cause of reaching Jerusalem and liberating the Holy Land. Apparently, Vasco da Gama puts the profane before the sacred. The collective voice of accusation, that resumes, according to Gerald Moser, "the widespread opposition voiced in the general assemblies and royal council meetings during the reigns of João II, Manuel, and João III"<sup>11</sup>, is embodied in a nameless figure traditionally designated by scholars as the Old Man of Restelo. It might seem that in the general framework of Camões' "historico-imaginative engagement with the ocean"<sup>12</sup>, the journey to India hardly implies any positive values.

The greatest of all maritime dangers is the eventuality of crossing the final frontier of what is conceptualised as 'the world'. The explorers are in danger of reaching the last cape, beyond which there is no return. Camões exploits the belief in the existence of such a final limit of available space, expressed in the legend of Cabo Não—a cape that cannot be circumnavigated because behind it lies a space of a different kind, unsuitable for human life due to torrential heat or haunted by monsters. As mentioned by Zurara in his *Crónica dos Feitos da Guiné*, this superstition, deeply rooted among the sailors ("geral e antiga fama"), could be proven false only at the risk of "ulterior harm", i.e. the eternal damnation ("postumeiro dano")<sup>13</sup>. There is thus a Christian factor in the superstition. Sailors setting out to search for a sea passage to India cross the invisible limits of the inhabitable sphere designed by God in his scheme of creation and redemption of man. Their transgressive deep-sea navigation is almost a repetition of the original sin committed by Adam and Eve in paradise. The inability to return is modelled by the expulsion of the first couple from the Garden of Eden. Yet in *The Lusíads*, the cape is removed from this Christian paradigm and reverted into the pagan sphere: it is personified by the titan Adamastor guarding the southern tip of Africa.



The project of navigation violates the divinely established order in more than one way. Hélder Macedo calls our attention to the intertextual relationship between *The Lusíads* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as two epic texts thematising the disturbance of the natural order: "as in the impious Iron Age, the final collapse of the harmony of the Golden Age is marked when the trees were brought down from the mountains and 'as ships, ploughed the unknown seas'. [...] Camões echoes Ovid's image to claim that the Portuguese ships, which in other passages he refers to as 'lenhos' (timbers) or 'troncos' (tree trunks), have ploughed through 'mares nunca dantes navegados' ('seas no man has ever sailed before')." <sup>14</sup> The displacement of the vegetal element from the earth to the ocean evokes a vision of chaos, destruction, dislocation, and the profound trauma of the transformative process switching the elemental polarities between such categories as 'the dry' and 'the humid'.

At a fundamental level, all deep-sea expeditions involve crossing the limits of the permitted sphere, because all of them involve abandoning the earthly element, the 'dry' world proper to man, in which humanity—in its natural state—is supposed to remain. All navigation is, in this sense, a violation of the order of nature. This is why, at the beginning of the expedition, a general curse is cast upon the heads of all sailors. Camões refers to the negative valuation of deep-sea navigation widespread in European medieval culture. As if in a premonition of the future becoming of Portugal, Dante had already criticised Florence, a city *quae mare, quae terram, quae totum possidet orbem* according to an inscription carved in the Palazzo del Bargello, for her sea-borne aspirations. In his *Inferno* (Canto XXVI) he depicted the flawed greatness of Ulysses, a figure that plays the same Adamic role in Dante's mythical system as it does among the invented ancestors of the Portuguese. His curiosity and will to penetrate the secrets of the world prompted him to abandon his household and domestic duties:

[...] nor fondness for my son,  
nor pious reverence for my agèd father,  
nor ev'n the bounden love which should have cheered  
Penelope, could overcome within me  
the eagerness I had to gain experience  
both of the world, and of the vice and worth  
of men; but forth I put upon the deep  
and open sea with but a single ship (Canto XXVI, 84–91). <sup>15</sup>

In hell, Odysseus suffers among fraudulent counsellors not just as the author of the war ruse that ensured the capture of Troy by the Greeks but also as one who has created a precedent of betraying most sacred duties to undertake reckless seafaring expeditions. The Portuguese, who according to legend are his descendants (as the inhabitants of the city of Ulissipo—Lisbon allegedly founded by Ulysses), are predestined to commit similar crimes. The Old Man of Restelo rebukes the inventor of deep-sea navigation as one who leads his descendants to certain death ("Oh! Maldito o primeiro que, no mundo, | Nas ondas vela pôs em seco lenho!" – Canto IV, 102).

Transgressors know well the boundaries they transgress and the punishments that await them. The Portuguese are aware of their share in Odysseus' fate, and yet they risk their "postumeiro dano", the eternal damnation. They ignore multiple warnings: not only the fate of Ulysses in Dante's *Inferno* but also the sign of Heracles, referring to the Pillars named after him as the limit of the navigable sea. They strive to overshadow the achievements of ancient travellers just like the new epic poem is to overshadow the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as Camões' immediate textual model, Virgil's *Aeneid*: the notoriety of their overseas expedition is repeatedly supposed to fade away the fame of the protagonists of the Trojan war and other heroes of the vaster antique world including Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome (Canto II, 44). What is more, at the very beginning of the text they are presented as men in contest with Death ("se vão da lei da Morte libertando" – Canto I, 2). This aspiration of immortality is precisely what brings about the wrath of the Olympian gods, who always punish those carried away by *hubris*, the guilty presumption that leads man to new endeavours and inventions. The wrath of Bacchus is kindled by the Portuguese endeavour to outbid not only the

glory of ancient heroes (“Cesse tudo o que Musa antiga canta” – Canto I, 3) but also his own deeds in India—he is presented as the first conqueror of India: his statue appears in the gardens of the palace of Samorin, the ruler of Calicut (“[...] esquecerão seus feitos no Oriente | Se lá passar a Lusitana gente” – Canto I, 30). This is why Bacchus, although a legendary forefather of the Portuguese (as the father of Luso or Lusus, the mythical founder of Portugal<sup>16</sup>), strives to hinder their progress.

The role of the defender of the established order is thus played not by Christian God but by Bacchus, the patron of drunkenness to whom such a role is the least becoming. However, by pitting the drunken pagan god against the Portuguese, Camões reduces the voltage of transgression. It becomes an expected and desirable act: Vasco da Gama is called to break an old, delegitimised order, barely standing on its shaky foundations. Triumphant over the will of the Olympian deities, he proclaims the advent of the Christian God and carries out his verdicts. Yet arguably, he is also instrumental in bringing about the new order of *Humanitas* personified by Venus, opening new sea routes and thus making possible new conviviality of the dispersed mankind.

Be that as it may, the Portuguese compete with their forefathers. Bacchus, Adamastor, and the Old Man of Restelo appear as old men confronted by young daredevils. As it has often been stressed, *The Lusiads* is a poem profoundly implicated in the patriarchal order<sup>17</sup>, be it in its overthrowing or merely its renovation. Bacchus embodies the figure of a father whom the young men wish to overcome and surpass in the eternal *agon* inscribed in the very centre of patriarchy. Hélder Godinho interprets the figure of the Old Man of Restelo as the embodiment of the sacred link with the native land.<sup>18</sup> Yet he is also a failed, decadent patriarch, excluded from the ongoing rhythm of life. What is significant, each of the forefathers stands also for an aspect of male sexual dysfunction. Adamastor, a titan transformed into rock and therefore unable to bring to consummation his love for a nymph,<sup>19</sup> epitomizes the eternal suspension in frustrated desire, just like the Old Man of Restelo and Bacchus incarnate impotence and inertia of the matter in which they are imprisoned. Masculinity encased in rock is incapable of either of the two types of performance that befit Gama’s companions: heroic acts and sexual union (consumed in the final sections of the poem on the Island of Love). What is more, Philip Hardie interprets the figure of Adamastor not only as the personification of alien geography, of the African coast as a space of wilderness and danger but also as a dark double of the epic poet himself. Delving into the link between Virgil’s *Fama* in the *Aeneid* as a figure impersonating the uncontrollable nature of rumour and the figure of Adamastor linked with excessive, uncontrolled desire translatable into the poet’s ambition of excellence, he reached conclusions concerning Camões’ fascination with the irrational factor in both poetry and history-making.<sup>20</sup>

Adamastor curses the sailors for their aspiration to reach out for forbidden knowledge. In his elaborate speech (Canto V, 41–59) he emphasizes the guilt resulting from crossing the eternal boundaries and learning about what was supposed to remain forever hidden from human sight (“[...] vens ver os segredos escondidos | Da natureza e do húmido elemento” – Canto V, 42). The titan predicts a punishment that will be meted out not only to the explorers but to all those who follow in their footsteps. The transgression perpetrated by Gama and his companions, the crossing of the eternal border, should remain without consequences: a road once travelled should not become a beaten track. Therefore, the curse of Adamastor is intended to bring punishment not on the explorers themselves but on their successors and all people who dare to take advantage of the new prospects that are open upon vast horizons of the future (“Sabe que quantas naus esta viagem | Que tu fazes, fizerem, de atrevidas, | Inimiga terão esta paragem” – Canto V, 43).

As the Portuguese break the imaginary limits of the Cabo Não and vanquish Adamastor, the discovery of the route to India fundamentally disrupts the world order, which until now consisted of separate, non-communicating areas, separated by the ocean. Now, due to the transformative and foundational value of the symbolic transgression, what was separated is about to come together: the oceans divinely created as obstacles change their symbolic polarity from negative to positive: they become roads of communication. This switch of polarities constitutes an offence against the will of the deity who organized the original order and may result in severe punishment, just like in Aeschylus’

tragedy *The Persians*, where military defeats – Salamis and Plataea – were presented as a punishment sent by gods for human *hubris*. The guilty achievement of the Persians consisted in building a bridge over the Hellespont; their *hubris* was to connect through a communication route what by the will of gods was supposed to remain separate. Yet in the humanist understanding of Christianity what comes to the fore is the partnership of the divine Creator and human transformers of the Creation.

It may also be regarded as a humanist peculiarity that the advocacy in favour of the Portuguese in their clash against the patriarchal order takes up a feminine form. The infraction implied in the seafaring endeavour is endorsed by Venus who appears in front of Jove hardly covered by “a veil of finest sendal” (“delgado cendal” – Canto II, 37). In her pleading in favour of the Portuguese, she uses not just arguments but also the embodied power of seduction, and as she speaks, sexual desires, almost materialised as ivy, entwine her legs (“Pelas lisas columnas the trepavam | Desejos, que como hera se enrolavam” – Canto II, 36). Yet significantly, female seduction is, in a way, just and truthful rather than false, misleading, or illusory. The Renaissance distribution of values differs from the medieval, essentially misogynous vision associating female charms and falseness. Camões follows the new astrological-allegorical order established by Florentine Neoplatonists in which Venus is the personification of *Humanitas*, just as the planet associated with her is regarded as a source of beneficent moral influences. The powers of illusion belong to Venus' adversary, Bacchus, who will repeatedly shape-shift and inspire false news, presenting the Portuguese as lawless sea robbers. Moreover, maritime transgression is repeatedly presented as something other than a crime resulting from giving in to impulses, material or erotic desires. Nobler motives are evoked, creating a sphere of excellence surrounding the foundational moments of imperial history. At the same time, the repeated idea of the Portuguese as a destructive, bloodthirsty, lawless factor (“Cristãos sanguinolentos, | Que quase todo o mar tem destruído” – Canto I, 79) creates a fluctuation in that sphere of discourse.<sup>21</sup>

As Bernhard Klein remembered in his provocative essay with a denial (*We are not pirates*) in the title, such a dimension of honourability and excellence was not in the least given in the maritime history that for centuries remained a peripheral sphere of activity where the horizon of lawlessness was constantly present. Camões strives to counter “a troubling moral accusation that could at any time be brought against the Portuguese imperial drive.”<sup>22</sup> All along *The Lusiads*, Gama repeats his declaration of loyalty and truthfulness, while events often contradict his claims. Just to give an example, the Portuguese repeatedly attack unarmed embarkations and make their occupants captive on the mere presupposition they may be infidels (“porque haviam de ser da Maura gente” – Canto II, 68). Certainly, one may guess that Camões was perfectly aware of how inglorious the victories of the fifteenth-century maritime expansion might have been. The expression of bitterness accompanying victories obtained against humble, ill-equipped adversaries is frequent in his lyrical poetry; also *The Lusiads* bears the marks of profound disenchantment with inglorious military actions. Even the song of Tethys on the Island of Love, narrating the history of *Estado da Índia* yet as a prophecy, sounds strangely dissonant in the crystal clear palace on the top of the ideal mountain. The beautiful and fragile nymph evokes macabre images of war, full of chopped arms and legs (“verá braços e pernas ir nadando | Sem corpos, pelo mar” – Canto X, 36), just as she laments the utter disgrace and lack of recognition that awaits the maritime heroes in their homeland.

Overall, Vasco da Gama and his intrinsically just, valiant men are surrounded by obstacles, miseries, disloyalty, and humiliations. Also, they are aware of the inglorious and morally dubious aspects of their mission. The horrors of war and the dangers of the sea are hardly compensating in commercial terms (due to the opposition of the Arab traders, the Portuguese hardly sell any goods and acquire any species for which they came such a long way). At the bottom line, the balance of the expedition is positive only if it is considered as an epistemological achievement. Knowledge is the only treasure they are able to bring back home. This is why the only stable discursive sphere of excellence is associated with the cognitive endeavour as a value in itself. It is the cognitive progress that utterly justifies the conquest and the foundation of an empire, not the other way around.

### The Completion of the World

*The Lusíads* constantly oscillates between the grandiose and the comely. Contrasting the Portuguese epic poem with the paradigm given in the *Aeneid*, Timothy Hampton sees a poem “divided between six books of wandering about the coast of Africa and four books of . . . well, dithering and negotiating in India. Indeed, one of the formal and rhetorical difficulties faced by Camões’ poem is precisely that, in contrast to the noble models it evokes at the outset, it offers no great feats of heroism, no unforgettable battles and no superhuman instances of individual courage. The poem is, in effect, about a trading mission or diplomatic sally from the Portuguese to India.”<sup>23</sup> Beyond this down-to-earth understanding of the events, the sea expedition is a guilty manifestation of *hubris* in the eyes of the ancient gods, and, as usually happens in similar situations, they try to punish the Portuguese for their presumption. However, this cannot succeed, because the venture of the explorers turns out to be the fruit of inspiration coming from the Christian God. The sailors obey the orders of a divinely inspired ruler, D. Manuel, as the idea of the expedition is the result of the ruler’s prophetic dream. Gama’s companions prove to be envoys, acting with a higher authority.

The attack on the current world order, the intention to “add new worlds to the world”, turns out to be the result not of man’s presumption but of God’s decision. As an ultimate instance, it is God who decides to change the current organization of the globe (which so far consisted of parts that did not communicate with each other and were separated rather than connected by the oceans), because the Time has come—the inhabitants of distant lands must have the opportunity to become acquainted with evangelical good tidings before the end of the world. Although the sailors could not look into the eyes of their mothers when leaving their home port, they return radiant with glory, because man’s aspirations that coincide with God’s will and encounter supernatural help are transferred to the sphere of nobility and excellence; their legitimacy is put beyond any doubt. At the beginning of Canto VII (1–14), deep-sea navigation is not only harmoniously inscribed in the Christian order of values but also acknowledged as an act worthy of highest recognition. The Portuguese maritime venture takes on an advantageous aspect as compared with the achievements of other Christian nations. The expedition is sanctified through inclusion in a religious perspective. The Portuguese are shown as martyrs for their faith and are additionally exalted thanks to the virtue of humility; as the smallest nation in Europe, they do the most to expand the scope of the Christian world. They disregard their “weak forces” (“o fraco poder”), adopting the terms of religious thinking in which the last are to be the first. Within the biblical paradigm, the fragile youngster David triumphs over the mighty Goliath. To fulfil their God-given mission, the sailors do not necessarily have to be stronger in purely human, worldly terms; their triumph results from the inscription of their transgressive will into the projects of God.

As Camões presents it, the Portuguese cooperate with God in the work of creation. They reorganize the world, aiming at its global unification. Thanks to the Portuguese intervention, there is a transition from a divided world, consisting of parts without the possibility of communication, to a unified world, united by communication routes paved by Portuguese expeditions. Adamastor’s anger turns out to be powerless. This unification of the world is seen from a Christian, rather than pagan perspective, as the opening of new opportunities for proselytism. A united world is a world open to evangelizing activity. Stepping away from the historical venture of the Crusades, Camões recognizes nonetheless the value of cognitive endeavour subordinated to religious purpose, aimed at showing the truth to infidels. The sea voyage is legitimized as an activity in favour of the faith.

The argument of *The Lusíads* could end at this point. The doubts of the Old Man of Restelo have been dissipated and the discovery of the maritime passage to India is dignified as a higher form of Crusade. However, there are still other, unexpected values resulting from navigation: the sea expedition provides an opportunity to reveal true virtue on the Island of Love. Contrary to what the beginning of the poem suggested, it turns out that Gama’s companions are not only interested in surpassing heroes and heroic categories borrowed from the pagan world, in reaching where Heracles

and Odysseus failed. Quite disturbingly, they also try to achieve concomitantly bodily fulfilment through sex and mystical transformation through enlightenment. The poem's pagan integument conceals a mystical content. The navigation in the labyrinth of the world, including the oceanic space, is a winding path to meeting the Absolute. Camões therefore blurs the distinction that appeared on the pages of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the sailing of the cursed Odysseus constituted an antithesis of the journey through Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise leading to God and true knowledge. In *The Lusiads*, the route leads through the ocean rather than the spaces of the afterlife, and sailing becomes the highest form of initiation. Transgression as a condition of the emergence of a new order requires a return to the formlessness of the original water element, from which the world will emerge in a new configuration, as if brought into existence by a renewed act of creation. It is realized as a violation of the spatial order, as an intrusion into an area from which man has been excluded. At the same time, it is also a violation of the order of the elements: the essence of the crime is the combination of what is dry and earthy with what belongs to the humid world. As Yvette Centeno emphasizes, a specific alchemical operation is necessary, leading to the creation of a new unity in which oppositions will be overcome.<sup>24</sup> The elements combined into a new type of *coincidentia oppositorum* must arrange themselves into perfected cosmic harmony.

The poem closes with the elaborate episode of the Island of Love, covering most of Cantos IX and X. As far as the explicit meaning of the text is considered, one may argue that the reader is confronted with a bold scene of collective orgy. On the Island of Love, the members of Gama's crew indulge in carnal pleasures in the company of sea nymphs, deliberately instructed by Venus in the art of love-making. The culmination of the epic appears as yet another instance of transgression, a betrayal of values in yet another sense. However, the events on the island mark a broader issue related to the possibilities and limitations of human cognition, and the interpretation of the episode allows us to reach the hidden, mystical message of the entire poem. The moment of triumph comes after the orgy: the captain of the expedition is shown the secrets of the organization of the world in a crystal sphere (the world in the womb of God) and learns about the future.

According to the traditional epic paradigm of catabasis (a journey to the underworld) present in the *Odyssey*, where Ulysses visits the dead, the sea voyage may be seen as analogous to the descent to hell. The navigation culminating in an orgy in the company of the sea nymphs is a return to the primordial chaos, from which the world will emerge in a new configuration, as if brought into existence by a renewed act of creation. The sailor's mission is to give a new structure to the global space, to recognize its order and mark it symbolically. In Camões' vision, the world can be transformed, yet this transformation involves sacrifice. The explorers expose themselves to countless sufferings and dangers, including the agony of guilt. Yet through the sailor's sacrifice, the vision of a world divided into regions with different characteristics is overcome. By breaking down the barriers dividing the major areas of the globe, the great unification is achieved. The final union of the divided world, the universal conjunction, takes place through love. As the microcosm of the human sexual body reflects the macrocosm, the supreme unifying force of desire operates not only on the bodily but also on the cosmic plane.

Any attempt to create a new order must be preceded by a temporary descent into the state of original chaos and the abolition of all oppositions. The explorers accomplish this in many ways, not only by long sailing through the undifferentiated and formless water element but also by descending into the 'chaos' of the orgy on the Island of Love, where the sailors start the sexual 'hunt' for the nymphs of Venus' retinue. However, soon after this transgressive experience, the order is rebuilt in a new, sublime form. After descending into the animal condition of the sexual desire, the transgressive dimension is obliterated by the ceremony of marriage. The entire episode requires a reading that accentuates its hidden, mystical meaning. It is certainly not only about presenting a paradise of physical pleasures, because the captain of the expedition experiences knowledge in a unique form: he ascends a mountain where he is able to see a vision of the perfect world in its crystal 'womb'. The



literary image of sexual transgression hides a different, much more serious meaning: for it is forbidden, within institutionalized religion, to directly know God through mystical experience.

### Conclusion

People and things in *The Lusiads* function on intersecting planes of illusion and deep, mystical meaning. Venus, who supports the Portuguese, and her retinue of nymphs do not entirely belong to the plane of the Olympian deities. Imperceptibly, the goddess transforms into the embodiment of God's Wisdom, and even the very space of moral transgression—the Island of Love—into the image of God himself. Vasco da Gama and his companions are ultimately shown not as traitors and criminals but as collaborators in the work of creation who 'give' new parts to the world and 'add' new areas to the global space. The transgressive coitus is only a symbolic announcement of the great unification of the world, a universal conjunction. Love becomes a principle of connection by which not only the bodies but also the separated parts of the world, as well as the world itself and its Creator are linked into a harmonious whole.

Radical transformative actions, both cognitive and those that interfere too deeply with matter, like those of an alchemist manipulating the elements, are risky. At any moment, man is exposed to the supreme danger of interfering with the divine will or entering the sphere of action reserved for God, the divine competencies. Such a concern is not alien to the spiritual climate of the Portuguese Renaissance. Yet Camões in *The Lusiads* rejects the attitude of quietism, assigning to man the role of God's partner. Man's involvement in the world, such as a daring maritime expedition, does not distract him or lead him away from true spiritual life. On the contrary, aspirations for worldly knowledge and spiritual illumination harmoniously combine. Even if the exploration of the world comes down to repeating the sin of curiosity committed in paradise, it ultimately turns out that the transgression made by the Portuguese is an indispensable part of the divine plan, just as the act of eating the apple of the Tree of Knowledge was also an integral part of the plan in which God's love for man is to be ultimately revealed. Without transgression, without an attack on the established and sacred world order, there would be no vision of the perfect world order that the Portuguese captain was allowed to see.

Through his epic narrative, Camões tried to acknowledge and codify certain rules of the relationship between man and the sacred. The poem was intended to reveal the essence of cooperation, breaking the apparent contradiction between man's unauthorized intervention in the world and his respect for the original, divinely created order of nature. It is intended to show the harmony underlying the relationship between man and God, and ultimately, not only to ennoble the discoverer but also to alleviate or solve the aporia inherent in the very essence of his activity.

The cycle of transgression and knowledge is a constantly repeating process of painful rule-breaking and the passage toward the euphoria of enlightenment that accompanies the discovery of a novel, transformative truth. Framing this cycle into an epic story, Camões tried to overcome the tragic potential of epistemic progress, building an image of great harmony extending to the world, man, and God. Knowing the cultural history that followed, we can see that his endeavour remained imperfect. The epic poem glorifying the transgression did not stop the progress of the Inquisitorial stifling of intellectual and spiritual freedom. Nonetheless, in the modern world, in which the rhythm of euphoria, disappointment, and new revision of the acquired knowledge becomes faster than ever before, Camões makes a productive reading. He explains the creative meaning of intellectual transgression, the necessity of betraying the obsolete truths, even the sense of exposing oneself to spiritual destruction while searching for new paths. In the religious horizon of his epoch, Camões taught that man could aspire to the status of a creature worthy of God only through transgression.



## Acknowledgments

This paper is the result of a research project financed by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, realized in Lisbon in 2024–2025. The author expresses her gratitude to the Foundation for their generous support, which made this study possible.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 5.
- <sup>2</sup> The appreciation of *The Lusiads* as an important part of world literature may be exemplified by the contribution of Paulo Horta, “Camões as World Author: Cosmopolitan Misreadings”, *1616: Anuario de Literatura Comparada*, no. 3 (2013), 45–65. A great part of the present-day scholarly commitment to *The Lusiads* consists of the readings made outside the European context of interpretation, expanding eastwards and westwards. See f. ex. Balachandra Rajan, “The Lusiads and the Asian Reader”, *Under Western Eyes: India from Milton to Macaulay* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 31–49. Also, the generativeness of Camões’ text, as Sara V. Torres argues, expands beyond the usual boundaries of the European early-modern literary network, finding a resonance in such contexts as Brazilian *literatura de cordel*; see: Sara V. Torres, “Oceanic Epic: The Translations of the *Lusiads* in the Global Renaissance.” *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 8, no. 1 (2019), 105–122.
- <sup>3</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (The Phenomenology of Knowledge)* (Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 143.
- <sup>4</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms of Metaphorology* (Trans. Robert Savage, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 123.
- <sup>5</sup> The question of *The Lusiads* as a narration of historical “truth” rather than poetic invention has been discussed in the classical essay by Thomas R. Hart, “The Idea of History in Camões’s *Lusiads*”, *Ocidente: Revista portuguesa de cultura*, 83 (1972), 83–97.
- <sup>6</sup> For English translation, I follow the version of William Atkinson (Penguin Books, 1952).
- <sup>7</sup> Clive Willis, “*The Lusiads* and the Literature of Portuguese Overseas Expansion”, *A Companion to Portuguese Literature*, Stephen Parkinson, Cláudia Pazos Alonso, & T. F. Earle (Eds.) (Boydell & Brewer, 2009), 72–84.
- <sup>8</sup> Sara V. Torres analyses the narration of the chivalrous expedition of Magriço to England in terms of anachronism and belatedness of the Portuguese culture. Sara V. Torres, “Oceanic Epic: The Translations of the *Lusiads* in the Global Renaissance.” *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 8, no. 1 (2019), 105–122.
- <sup>9</sup> Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval, “Love and the Empire in *Os Lusíadas*”, *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* 7 (2008), 240.
- <sup>10</sup> Bernhard Klein, “Camões and the Sea: Maritime Modernity in *The Lusiads*”, *Modern Philology* 111: 2 (2013), 158.
- <sup>11</sup> Gerald M. Moser. “What Did the Old Man of the Restelo Mean?” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 17, no. 2 (1980), 141.
- <sup>12</sup> Josiah Blackmore, “The Shipwrecked Swimmer: Camões’s Maritime Subject”, *Modern Philology* 109 (2012), 314.
- <sup>13</sup> Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica de Guiné* (ed. José de Bragança, Porto: Livraria Civilização, 1973), p. 46.
- <sup>14</sup> Hélder Macedo, “*The Lusiads*: Epic Celebration and Pastoral Regret”, *Portuguese Studies*, 1990, Vol. 6 (1990), 32.
- <sup>15</sup> For English translation, I follow the version of Courtney Langdon (Harvard University Press, 1918).
- <sup>16</sup> Camões widely recreates the figure of Lusus, transforming it into a part of a literary mythology of the Portuguese; see João R. Figueiredo, “Luís de Camões’s *The Lusiads* and the paradoxes of expansion”, in Kathleen Christian, and Bianca de Divitiis (eds), *Local antiquities, local identities: Art, literature and antiquarianism in Europe, c. 1400–1700* (Manchester, 2018; online edn, Manchester Scholarship Online, 23 May 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9781526117045.003.0010>, accessed 6 Oct. 2023.
- <sup>17</sup> Denise Saive Castro, “Empty fathers and failing empires: patrilineality and masculinity in *Lusiadas*”, *Via Atlântica* 33, 2018, 325–341; Moira Richards, “Adamastor: a post-patriarchal approach”, *Scrutiny*, 4, 2 (1999), 73–74.
- <sup>18</sup> Hélder Godinho, “Para uma mitocrítica de *Os Lusíadas*”, in *A Viagem de Os Lusíadas. Símbolo e Mito* (Lisboa: Cosmos, 2000), 37–41.
- <sup>19</sup> Against the widespread opinion pointing to the *Aeneid* as the textual model of *The Lusiads*, Leonor Santa Bárbara calls our attention to the fact that the figure of Adamastor has no direct precedent in Virgil’s poem; it may derive from Theocritus’ Idyll XI, “The Cyclops”, where young Polyphemus is in love with Galatea.

- Leonor Santa Bárbara, "Two Giants in Love: Epic and Bucolic Poetry", in *Literature and Cultural Memory* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 136–144.
- <sup>20</sup> Philip Hardie, "Adamastor and the Epic Poet's Dark Continent", in Philip Hardie (ed.), *Augustan Poetry and the Irrational* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2016), 281–292.
- <sup>21</sup> My point contradicts multiple readings of *The Lusiads* as "the central expression of imperial ideology in Portugal", to quote the expression used by Josiah Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition: Shipwreck Narrative and the Disruption of Empire*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 20. In fact, the poem plays such a role in the dominant reading of Portuguese literary and cultural history, yet the locus of ideological incertitude, inscribed in the text, had to be overlooked in order to preserve the coherence of the overall cultural landscape. On the other hand, it has well been noticed that there is also a vein of anti-imperial dissent countering the overt praise of the Portuguese conquests within the poem; see Matthew M Gorey, "Pietas and the 'Other Camões' — subversive translation and allusion in *The Lusiads*", *Classical Receptions Journal*, vol. 11, no 2 (2019), 211–229.
- <sup>22</sup> Bernhard Klein, "'We are not pirates': Piracy and Navigation in *The Lusiads*", in Claire Jowitt (ed.), *Pirates? The Politics of Plunder, 1550–1650* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 106.
- <sup>23</sup> Timothy Hampton, "Virgil in India: Epic, History, and Military Tactics in the *Lusiads*", *MLN* 130, no. 2 (2015), 170.
- <sup>24</sup> Yvette Centeno, "O Cântico da Água em *Os Lusíadas*", *A Viagem de Os Lusíadas. Símbolo e Mito* (Lisboa: Cosmos, 2000), 17.

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# “Inner Peace”, “Reversal”, and “Indeterminable Tao”: Lin Zhaohua’s Assimilation of Taoism

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CHENGYUN ZHAO

**Abstract:** This essay interprets how Taoism influences Lin Zhaohua’s attitude towards political and cultural hegemony, *xiqu*’s aesthetics, and directing aesthetics with regard to his allusions to the specific texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Through analyses, I uncover how Lin holds the Taoist “inner peace” to prevent the disruptions of political and academic authorities, how the Taoist tenet, “Reversal is the action of Tao”, helps Lin theorize his methods of Sinicizing *huaju* with *xiqu*’s aesthetics, and how the indeterminable Tao frees Lin from the restraints of fixed theatrical school. The essay thus argues that Lin’s application of Taoist tenets in his directing life parallels the way of pursuing Taoist freedom and enables him to stand at the forefront of the field of Chinese theatre. The Taoism-based theory of intercultural performance has the potential to resist hegemonic “Western” theories and the equality emphasised in Taoism could contribute to the establishment of heterogeneous communications among different theatrical cultures.

*Keywords:* Lin Zhaohua, Taoism, theatre, *xiqu*, *huaju*

Considered one of the most significant Chinese theatre directors since the 1980s, Lin Zhaohua and his productions have been analyzed from numerous perspectives such as avant-garde features, the aesthetics of *xiqu* (Chinese Opera 戏曲), historical significance, etc. For example, Li Ruru interprets the historical and cultural impacts on Lin’s adapted production of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (premiered in 1990; Li 1999: 355–367). Bettina S. Entell and Alexa Alice Joubin associate Lin’s *Hamlet* with June-Fourth Movement (1989) inside China (Entell 2002: 126; Joubin 2021: 3). Lin Weiyu discusses Lin amalgamation of *xiqu*’s narrative techniques and “stream of consciousness” in his adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* (premiered in 2006, Lin 2016: 37–52). However, the philosophical foundations that influenced Lin’s directing experiences have rarely been discussed. Lin is influenced by traditional Chinese philosophies and has often mentioned the influences of *Chan* (禅 a philosophical and religious school of Chinese Buddhism) and Taoism. According to the words of Lin Weiyu, a scholar who owns a long-term friendship with Lin Zhaohua and constantly interviewed Lin Zhaohua from 2002 to 2004 in Beijing, Lin Zhaohua is retired and indulges himself every day in books about *Chan* rather than any other theories.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding this, combing through Lin Zhaohua’s own texts embodied in his essays as well as interviews published in the last forty-odd years, he rarely talks about how the tenets of *Chan* affect any specific methods adopted in his productions. On a few occasions when he mentions *Chan*, he only uses “epiphany” to express that artistic creating should not repeat or be classified into any existing theatrical schools, and “epiphany” leads him to numerous brilliant designs in his acclaimed productions (Lin 1992: 292). Meanwhile, “Laozi and Zhuangzi, [the initiators and representative philosophers of Taoism]” are also considered by

Lin to help him approach the psychological state of the so-called “epiphany” as well as “a new world of theatre” (Lin 2014a: 62). Lin, on countless occasions, traces the concepts or phrases of Taoism in order to elaborate on his behaviours or directing aesthetics. Hence, I argue it is impractical to study Lin’s directing life from *Chan*. Taoism could provide a new perspective to interpret Lin’s attitudes toward the external world, *xiqu*’s aesthetics, and directing aesthetics.

Taoism is one of the oldest indigenous Chinese philosophies initiated by Laozi and Zhuangzi during the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period (770BC – 221BC). As a philosophy focusing on individuals instead of collective groups, Taoism encourages human beings to pursue a free life by detaching themselves psychologically from the external society. Taoist philosophers praise nonexistence as they believe the existent world comes from nonexistence, thus, nonexistence embodies infinite possibilities to develop. Since things keep developing from nonexistence to existence, and further, from existence to nonexistence, Taoist philosophers take reversal as a tenet to describe the action of the world. These tenets will be further utilized to discuss Lin’s directing experiences. Chen Rongjie argues that the Taoist concepts such as “abstract” and “void” were borrowed by the subsequent followers of Chinese Buddhism, and Zhuangzi’s texts greatly influenced Chinese Buddhism, particularly *Chan* Buddhism (Chen 2006: 143, 167). That is to say, in China, Taoism is more primordial than *Chan* Buddhism.

In this essay, I do not claim that Taoism is the most significant cause that guides Lin’s choices and behaviours during his directing life which should be fostered by various elements; yet, his utilization of Taoist arguments to illustrate his understanding of theatre or the field of theatre could prove a change of his comprehension of theatre from a naïve realist perspective to a meta-physical or theoretical one. Most of Lin’s personal texts are recorded in his biographical book, *Comic Book of Lin Zhaohua* (2014), co-edited by Lin Weiyu and Xu Xin. I will take this book as a main academic source, accompanied by some of his essays as well as his interviews published online, to study the Taoist influences on him in a topical instead of chronological way. All the Chinese texts cited in this essay are my translations.

### “Inner Peace”: Challenging Political and Cultural Hegemony

I first come to interrogate the Taoist influences on Lin by putting them into the socio-political context where Lin lives. Born in 1936, Lin Zhaohua witnessed and experienced the hegemonic propaganda during his most energetic ages—the years after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Lin always expresses his dissatisfaction with the political propaganda of communism (Lin 2014a: 20–24). During the 1950s when the Chinese teenagers were educated to establish the same pursuit of contributing to communism and sacrifice their lives for communism, Lin kept interrogating the value of these pursuits. He suffered from the hierarchical political system as his application for participating in the acceptance examination of The Central Academy of China was once rejected by his manager of a military-owned Film Studio in 1957. His anti-hegemonic thoughts first revealed themselves during his undergraduate program when he was asked to work on farms in the countryside: “I come to the theatre academy to study. Why would I come to the university to stay in the countryside without payment for a long time? Why don’t you just transfer me to the School of Agriculture” (Wu 2011)? Lin’s negative attitude towards hegemonic politics was intensified during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when he and his wife were forced by the political requisites to publicly excoriate his father-in-law who was defined as a capitalist betraying communism. Some of Lin’s most respectable predecessors such as Zhao Qiyang, Jiao Juyin, Diao Guangtan, Yu Shizhi, Lan Tianye, Ying Ruocheng, etc., at the same time, were sent to the countryside or industries to receive communist education. Even though, he did not berate the hegemonic politics publicly, which might be attributed to his living context when most people were cautious about expressing their real political arguments in mainland China.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, all these experiences

only revealed themselves as a weak complaint even in the New Age after the proclamation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy (1978-): “There are too many conferences held by the Communist Party of China. I hate attending conferences! The others compete to express their loyalty to communism... All that they say is hypocritical...” (Lin 2014b: 40). His dissatisfactions and complaints about the hypocritical performances of the meetings hegemonically required by the Chinese authorities are, to some extent, solved by Taoism. Although his first encounter with the texts of Taoism was in the mid-late 1980s (Lin 2014b: 129), Lin’s knowledge of Taoism as a concept could be traced back to 1976. He recollects:

Every morning [in 1976], I went to Tongzi River (*Tongzi he* 筒子河) to practice acting and voice. A teenager practised kung fu there these days. He was fit and strong. One day, I could not help but ask him, “What kind of kung fu are you practising?” The teenager answered while practising, “Nine Dragons with Eighteen Skills (*Jiulong shibashu* 九龙十八术)...” When we became familiar with each other, he told me he was a *qigong* massager at China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences.<sup>3</sup> Massage and *qigong* are worth learning. This young man taught me Taoist Meridian kung fu (*Daojia ziwugong* 到家子午功). [The only gesture of this kung fu is] making fists with both hands. There were a lot of meetings held in [Beijing People’s Art Theatre]. I practised [Taoist Meridian kung fu] and did not pay much attention to the content of every meeting so that the meeting which often lasted hours felt like a very short period for me. At the end of the meetings, I concluded with several sentences, “This problem is significant and needs more discussions...” This means I at least used my mind during the meetings. At every meeting, we rarely sat in sofas but cross-legged on the ground. Yu Shizhi found this phenomenon in days and asked me after a meeting, “What were you doing there, Zhaohua?” I confessed to him, “Practicing Taoist kung fu...” I told him, “You can also practice this [Taoist kung fu] if you don’t want to listen to the meetings held by the municipal Party committees. Nobody else will discover that...” (Lin 2014b: 81).

The overarching target of practising *qigong* is maintaining the “inner peace” of one’s psychological state; yet, this text shows that Lin’s deployment of the “inner peace” of Taoist kung fu not only helps him psychologically escape from the political meetings but also enables him to implicitly protest against the hegemonic political requisites of the Communist Party of China.

Confronting the corruptive society two thousand-odd years ago, Zhuangzi maintained an “inner peace” and negatively reacted to the external world. Yan Shian investigates Zhuangzi’s “inner peace” by arguing that Zhuangzi’s negative responses to the darkness manifest themselves as carelessness, which could be considered an implicit and mockery resistance (Yan 2011: 95). As a director of a State-owned theatre whose family members are all working for the Chinese authorities, it might be impossible for Lin to explicitly say “No” to the activities of hegemonic political propaganda, particularly endless political meetings. Thus, the Taoist Meridian kung fu endows him with an “inner peace” and enables him to psychologically escape from the hypocritical political propaganda, which can be read as a silent resistance.

Further, the ideologies in China are also affected by the hegemonic authorities. Lin angrily says, “Artistic creation should be individual” (Lin, Peng, and Meng 2018). Guo Shixing, Lin’s close collaborator, explains this sentence to the interviewers: “The problem he faced at that time was that government did not allow artists to express themselves freely; it wanted to turn artists into a mouthpiece of official politics” (Lin, Peng, and Meng 2018). The hegemonic politics always restrict the development of arts and cultures, and does not let the Chinese artists create freely. The political restrictions on artistic creations, particularly Lin’s creations, are usually carried out through pro-socialist scholars and State-owned theatres. When asked about his attitude towards the negative reflections from the external society, Lin conveys, “I definitely accept the insightful comments but care not a little bit of those who humiliate me... The Taoist philosophers accentuate the importance of ‘inner peace’. I don’t think I can create any great productions if I am worried about what achievements or prizes they can get” (Baobaodu 2011).<sup>4</sup> This is not a whim idea but should be attributed to Lin’s own experiences in the field of



Chinese *huaju* (spoken drama) which is imbued with academic hegemony. Considered one of the forefront figures of Chinese “explorative theatre” (Tansuo xiju 探索戏剧) in the 1980s, Lin keeps exploring the alternative aesthetics of the (socialist) realist tradition of Chinese *huaju*. Yet, his experimental productions, not like the others that mainly receive applause around mainland China, are usually excoriated by audiences, especially some academic scholars, for betraying the realist tradition, because BPAT, the leading theatre around China where he works, is constructed modelling after Stanislavki’s Moscow Art Theatre and deploying realist performance as its tradition. The experimental or avant-garde features embodied in his productions are usually criticized as too formalistic and lacking content (Ma 2007). What is noteworthy is the “failure” of his *Three Sisters Waiting for Godot* (premiered in 1998), a collage of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, which premiered in 1998. *Three Sisters* is one of Chekhov’s most outstanding dramas. It was written in 1900 and had its debut in 1901 at the Moscow Art Theatre. The play tells the story of the boring life of the three sisters of the Prozorov family. Such a life is disturbed by the soldiers led by the gallant Vershinin. The sisters’ desire to go to Moscow, where they grew up but had not been again for many years, grows stronger while witnessing their little brother, Andrey, losing his dream of being a violinist. They discuss with the soldiers about the outside world and the future world, which gives them more expectations of going outside this small town. After a large fire in this small town, the soldiers are about to leave. The three sisters are left to continue their life of boredom. As for the play *Waiting for Godot*, the most distinguished play by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are set to wait for somebody called Godot on an anonymous road with a tree nearby. They do not know who Godot is and why they are waiting for him/her. The whole play is filled with their conversations about themselves, the surroundings, Lucky and Pozzo, and Godot, which sound paradoxical. In this production, Lin finds a similarity between these two plays—“Waiting”. The three sisters are waiting for someone who can take them to Moscow while Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot. In order to highlight the waiting conditions of these two groups of characters, Lin deletes most other characters such as Andrey, Natalia, Fyodor, and some soldiers of *Three Sisters*, and Lucky and Pozzo of *Waiting for Godot*. Because this production is concerned with two different plays and does not conform to some principles of realism, a unified story and realistic scenography for example, this experimental production was lambasted by countless veteran scholars in BPAT and the field of Chinese theatre who were “loyal disciples” of socialist realism and harshly refused to take a collage of these two canonical plays into one production at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Further, the three sisters on Lin’s stage are nearly static and the texts are woven with each other without any explicit boundaries, which confused the ordinary Chinese audiences in 1998 who got used to socialist realist performances for decades. Thus, the audiences also showed their distaste for this work as around half of the audiences left the auditorium during the performance and Lin and Yi Liming, the stage designer of the praxis, lost around 370,000 CNY in creating it (Lin 2014a: 303).<sup>5</sup> Lin was upset about the failure of the box office and was annoyed by those conservative scholars who were dominant in power discourse.

According to Guo Xiaonan, the publicly published comments in China usually represent the attitude of the Chinese authorities. The writers of these comments neither analyze nor know new theatrical aesthetics, thus, they sometimes hurt the development of theatrical troupes (Guo 2019: 104). Lin has only been awarded two prizes—The Theatre Academy Award (Directing Award) of The Central Academy of Drama and The Best Director Award of The Denny Award in Beijing for International Excellence in Theatrical Arts (2015)—in mainland China even though he is the initiator of the Chinese little theatre movement and encourages numerous Chinese directors of the younger generations to explore theatrical aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> The managers of BPAT do not want to admit that Lin has worked as the deputy chair of this theatre. When

BPAT celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of establishment in 2002, the official report listed every director who had worked for this theatre except Lin Zhaohua and his friend Li Liuyi; Lin cut out this report from the newspaper and hung it in his home, implicitly protesting against the managers.<sup>7</sup> Lin's friend, Hu Weimin, also mentions, "[Lin] once said sadly with a frown and head slightly raised: 'I acknowledge that I am the son of Beijing People's Art theatre, but Beijing People's Art theatre does admit that I am its son'" (Hu 1992: 158). In 2006, Lin adapted Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (premiered in 2006) to criticize those dominant intellectuals of the field who stick to their so-called traditions and block the younger generations' ways of exploring new methods in Chinese theatre (Lin 2014b: 287). Li Zehou's analyses of Zhuangzi's writings could help to understand Lin's attitudes towards external comments: "An individual gets rid of the restrictions brought by external issues, thus, he achieves absolute freedom... This is Zhuangzi's ideal personality" (Li 1985 78-9). Lin also achieves his artistic pursuits by detaching himself from external comments. According to the texts mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, Lin's concern about the achievements of his productions awarded by the hegemonic scholars of the field of Chinese theatre was converted to carelessness after he read the texts of Taoism. Such carelessness, brought by the Taoist "inner peace", does not insinuate that Lin gives up challenging realist tradition. On the contrary, Lin only closes his ears to prevent himself from the negative comments—maintains a psychological state of "inner peace" while facing the excoriations—and, as a one-way output, challenges continuously the dominant realist tradition of Chinese *huaju* in his productions as well as interviews.

How does Taoism influence Lin to challenge hegemonic (socialist) realism? After 1949, (socialist) realism became the orthodox mode of representing the socialist reality in mainland China. According to Yang Lan, the main political targets of socialist realism are "to idealise realistic life according to communist ideological standards" and "to educate people in socialist ideology and spirit" (Yang 1996: 94-5). Therefore, the dominant (socialist) realism in the field of Chinese *huaju* could be considered an artistic manifestation of political hegemony. While creating their third little theatre production, *Wild Man* (premiered in 1985), Lin and Gao both expressed their distaste towards socialist realism and the Confucian literati tradition. From late 1983 to early 1984, Gao encountered numerous Chinese folk arts, coupled with the ideas of Taoism and *Chan*, and decided to challenge the dominant socialist realism and Confucianism with these primitive cultures of ethnic minorities or marginalized Chinese philosophies. Lin's interest in adopting folk arts to replace socialist realism in *huaju* is inspired by his reading of Tao Yuanming's essay, *The Peach Colony* (Taohuayuan ji 桃花源记). Tao, one of the most prominent writers in ancient China, is usually considered a sage-like man who lives according to the Taoist tenets. Tao was invited by the current authorities many times to be an official but always resigned dozens of days after due to his disgust at the Confucian political culture as well as his love for a peaceful life in nature. Interestingly, Zhuangzi was also suggested to be the prime minister of his country but rejected due to his love for a free and natural life (Wang 2021: 221-2). *The Peach Colony* is one of Tao's most well-known essays which expresses his love for nature and his eagerness to leave society. Lin writes, "I love nature. Nature brings infinite enjoyable feelings of beauty to human beings. That's why Tao Yuanming wrote *The Peach Colony*" (Lin 2014b: 131). This idea encourages Lin to discover what could represent nature. He states in subsequent, "Folklores and witchcraft rituals can also contribute, to a large extent, [to the creation of theatre]. No Confucian elements" (Lin 2014b: 131). This argument constructs a dialogue with Laozi and Zhuangzi's socio-cultural pursuits: Laozi and Zhuangzi were willing to take advantage of ahistorical and asocial human nature to criticize the socio-cultural requirements of the last dynasty advocated by Confucius (Zheng 2019: 17-8). Lin also wants to take folk arts that feature nature to deconstruct the Chinese theatrical traditions coloured by Confucianism.

In *Wild Man*, a singer who represents nature wears a cloth that is designed to be black and

white to refer to the Taoist *yin* (阴), *yang* (阳), and Eight Trigrams (*bagua* 八卦). He is also called by the protagonist, an ecologist, as a man who believes in Taoism. It seems that the indigenous Chinese folk arts are considered by Lin to represent nature, which are altogether symbolized by Taoism. Under the guidance of Taoism, Lin and Gao in *Wild Man* deploy the dances of the traditional Shamanic ritual *Nuo* (傩), the performances of indigenous Chinese legends such as “God *Pan Gu* (盘古) using an axe to chop and create the universe” and “God *Kua Fu* (夸父) chasing the sun”, and the wild men living before civilization. The entire stage is designed as a chaotic space which refers to Laozi and Zhuangzi’s imagination of the birth of the universe (Zhang 1995: 44). The stage of *Wild Man* is no longer a well-organized realist performance but a chaotic carnival of nature-fostered entertainment. More Chinese folk arts are utilized by Lin afterwards. To list a few, he stages *yangko* dance, a popular rural folk dance in Liaoning province, in *Birdmen* (Niaoren 鸟人, premiered in 1993), to deconstruct the solemn of realist performance; adopts the Beijing rhythmic hawking arts in *Teahouse* (Chaguan 茶馆, premiered in 1999) to depict the life of grassroots in Beijing; and recruits the professional performers from Shaanxi province to sing the local operas *Lao Qiang* (老腔) and *Qin Qiang* (秦腔) in *White Deer Plain* (Bailu Yuan 白鹿原, premiered in 2006) so as to reveal a vulgar singing that is almost opposite to the so-called civilized realist acting<sup>8</sup>, etc.

As Terry Eagleton conveys for the modern era of late capitalism: “aesthetic becomes the guerrilla tactics of secret subversion, of silent resistance, of stubborn refusal.” For him, aesthetic form becomes its content: “a form which repulses all social semantics and might just allow us a glimpse of what it might conceivably be life to be free” (Eagleton 1990: 369). It is arguably that Taoism inspires Lin to use the indigenous Chinese folklores, which are closer to nature and rooted in lower-class Chinese people’s life and free from any restrictions of forms, in order to find an alternative aesthetics of dominant socialist realism and implicitly challenge the hegemonic political ideologies. The Taoist “inner peace” enables Lin to avoid political accusations, but does not forbid Lin from expressing his complaints about the hegemonic Chinese politics implicitly through the lens of challenging dominant socialist realism implicitly.

### “Reversal is the Action of Tao”: Sinicizing Huaju with Reformed Xiqu’s Aesthetics

Due to his inability to read English texts, Lin did not have a deep understanding of the modernist theatrical theories such as “The Theatre of Absurd”, “Theatre of the Cruelty”, stream of consciousness, and among others, that were introduced into China in the 1980s regardless of their dates of creation. Lin’s own directing aesthetics is mainly influenced by his own experiences. Lin was born in a big family where most of his relatives were theatre-goers of Chinese *xiqu* and in 1936 when traditional Chinese arts were still relatively influential around mainland China. During his study at The Central Academy of Drama (*Zhongyang xiju xueyuan* 中央戏剧学院), the current president of the university, Ouyang Yuqian, asked the staff of the Department of Acting to teach their students traditional Chinese *xiqu* and *quyi* (rhythmic storytelling). He subsequently worked at Beijing People’s Art Theatre, one of the most authentic State-owned theatres in China. During Lin’s early career, Jiao Juyin, one of Lin’s most respectful predecessors, put forward the “Chinese School of Theatre” (*Zhongguo xuepai* 中国学派) by arguing Sinicizing *huaju* with traditional Chinese arts: “We have to own Chinese School of Directing, Chinese School of Performing, enabling *huaju* to demonstrate perfectly the emotions and states of our nation” (Jiao 1988: 13). Often considered a disciple of Jiao’s “Chinese School of Theatre”, Lin has a strong background in indigenous arts and always insisted on assimilating traditional Chinese culture, particularly *xiqu*, to develop *huaju*. While pursuing this target, how does Taoism influence his methods of using *xiqu*’s aesthetics? The essay does not argue that Lin’s assimilations of *xiqu*’s aesthetics are solely influenced by Taoism, yet, Taoism could be used as one of various ideas that contribute to these assimilations.

Lin concludes the Taoist influence to his deployment of *xiqu*'s aesthetics in the subsequent text:

I abide by Stanislavski's [acting system] for years, and then I find the concepts of "jumping in and out of characters" and *Verfremdungseffekt* of Bertolt Brecht. These [theories] are incompatible with *xiqu*'s aesthetics. *Xiqu*'s actors do not care about "jumping in and out of characters". They perform very freely. From a perspective of Taoism, nonexistence fosters existence; Out of One, Two; Out of Two, Three; Out of Three, the created universe. From the perspective of space, the stage of *xiqu* is empty. Emptiness can express everything (Lin 2014a: 71).

This text proves that the Taoist nonexistence or void influences Lin's methods of Sinicizing *huaju* with *xiqu*'s aesthetics in two ways: The freedom of actors' performance and the empty stage. Stanislavski's system requires its actors' performances to be monolayered or "I am". Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* develops the performing arts to be double-layered—a character and the objective narratives "jumping" out of the character.<sup>9</sup> Both theories limit their actors to one or two specific identities during the performance. Taoist nonexistence takes Lin to realize that *xiqu*'s actors do not care about what identities they are performing so that they cannot be classified into specific identities but perform freely. What should be highlighted here is that Lin does not mean to make identities non-existent, but rather wants to make the boundaries among different identities non-existent, thus, all identities could be performed by the same character at the same time. This understanding of *xiqu*'s acting is extracted from a Taoist tenet, "reversal is the action of Tao". In Chapter Forty of *Laozi*, Laozi writes, "Reversal is the action of Tao. Weakness is the function of Tao. The things of the world come out of existence, and existence comes out of non-existence" (Chen 2020: 217). Lin specifies this argument by alluding to another sentence of Laozi and compares it with dialectics in order to make it more comprehensible: "Chapter Twenty-Two of *Laozi* writes, 'The partial becomes complete; the crooked, straight... He whose (desires) are few gets them; he whose (desires) are many goes astray'. These are all about dialectics" (Lin 2017: 33)! Applying this tenet to Lin's arguments of *xiqu*'s acting aesthetics, the performance of *xiqu*'s actors that need not be or cannot be classified into fixed identities gives rise to infinite layers of the actors as well as their performances. Simply put, the cancellation of the classification of different identities, on the contrary, enriches the identities. A *xiqu*'s performer can perform with various methods through different times, spaces, and identities. Lin argues, "What [*xiqu*'s artists] explore is the multilayers of performance" (Lin 1985: n.p.). He extracts "dual structure acting" (*Biaoyan de shuangchong jiegou* 表演的双重结构) from *xiqu*'s acting aesthetics and dismantles the boundary between actor and character to be void. Practically to say, Lin's de-classification of his actors' identities is manifested as "performing simultaneously an actor and a character" (Gu 2018a: 21). Lin Zhaohua lists three ways to achieve his "dual-structure acting": *zhui-yilistic* narrative, audience-facing narrative, and storyteller's narrative (Lin 2010a: 280).<sup>10</sup> Due to the limited word count, I will briefly introduce three main methods by which he achieves the multilayers of identities out of the nonexistence of classified ones.

*Zhui-yilistic* narrative (the narrative of recollection) asks actors to change the dialogues that are currently happening to a narrative story that happened in the past. Differing from those who perform or "dive into" their recollections, Lin's actors, while performing *zhui-yilistic* narratives, should hold the state in present to narrate the past. The actors use a tone similar to a third-person perspective and past tense to speak their texts; yet, the third-person perspective here does not refer to anyone else but their characters in the present. These actors, while performing their characters in the present, narrate the stories of their characters in the past. By doing so, Lin's actors perform simultaneously the actors in the present, the characters in the present, and the characters in the past. The entire story is transformed into a recollection of the characters in the present. This *xiqu*'s aesthetics could be interpreted from the Taoist arguments on time. Zhuangzi writes, "There was a beginning. There was a beginning before that

beginning. There was a beginning previous to that beginning before there was the beginning" (Chen 2019: 80). What Zhuangzi wants to express here is that people should not treat time as a sequential concept, because, as a part of Tao, time should be indivisible. The concepts such as "past", "present", and "future" are coined by human beings, which hurts the completeness of time. Ye Weilian compares this Taoist argument with the Chinese language – particularly the ancient Chinese which does not have tense – which enables traditional Chinese literature to challenge the limitations of time periods (Ye 2002: 12). Under such a view of time, different periods in traditional Chinese literature could be juxtaposed or disordered as they are originally the same thing. There is no evidence to prove the direct influence of the Taoist arguments on time to the traditional Chinese literature, *xiqu* included, but Lin's assimilation of *xiqu*'s recollection resonates with Ye's illustrations of such an aesthetic connection. The view of time in the *zhui-yi*stic narrative of Lin's actors is synonymous with Zhuangzi's understanding of time in which the "past", "present", and "future" cannot be segregated but is a unity. The borders between different periods are treated as nonexistent, thus, multiple periods or the feelings of the periods could be staged simultaneously.

Moreover, audience-facing narrative lets actors change inter-character dialogues to be the communications between characters and audiences. This is a technique frequently used in *xiqu* in which *xiqu*'s characters usually speak or sing out their inner thoughts directly to audiences. Lin asks his actors to directly speak the characters' texts, even the texts as a part of dialogues, to audiences and deliver the characters' emotions to audiences; he thus wants the fictional emotion to transcend the "fourth wall" and affect the real world of the audiences. This aesthetics reverberates with Taoism in the field of artistic space dimension. I need to trace to a Taoist argument, "revering the real" (*shang zhen* 尚真), that influences one "essence" of *xiqu*'s acting aesthetics. The word, "real" (*zhen* 真), is utilised sixty-six times in *Zhuangzi* to illustrate Zhuangzi's praise of "real". Talking about the real as a virtue, he writes, "Real is a man's pure sincerity in its highest degree. Without this pure sincerity, one cannot move others" (Chen 2019: 874). In other words, Zhuangzi believes that one can move others with the real that is rooted in his heart, which unveils a unity between the psychological world and the physical world. Laozi states, "The great governance [of Tao] does not have distinguishment" (Chen 2020: 173), which uses political philosophy to indicate his ontology that everything – no matter psychological, physical, or conceptual – is connected with each other and cannot be differentiated. All boundaries in between are not created by the world itself but defined by human beings. Zhuangzi's argument of "revering the real" extends Laozi's argument and aims to dismantle the boundaries by deploying the external, physical, and formal features to understand and reflect the internal and psychological real. He puts forward not only "There are no boundaries between things and those who use things (human beings)", but also "Tao is the one connecting all" (Chen 2019: 614, 69). As a result, everything transcends the boundaries and becomes a unity. When Lin's actor speaks out the character's psychological movements, he transcends the border between the character's psychological real and the fictional world. When he further speaks this to the audiences, the borders between the fictional world and the auditorium collapse as well. Thereafter, the borders between the characters' psychological world and *xiqu*'s fictional world, and between the fictional world onstage and the real world of the auditorium are discarded in Lin's audience-facing narrative to be non-existence and different spaces could be united into One.

Lastly, storyteller's narrative requires actors to maintain both the identities of narrators and characters. The actors, during the performance, on the one hand, speak texts with an observational attitude, and on the other hand, perform or experience characters. Sometimes, they cross-perform different identities; other times, they play the roles of characters while narrating. This method keeps signalling to audiences that the actors are playing the roles of characters rather than are characters themselves.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these three main methods, more methods



such as “actors watch performances with audiences” and “actors perform with scripts in their hands” are deployed by Lin according to *xiqu*’s aesthetics. Thus, Lin’s actors can “jump into characters”, “jump out of characters”, narrate, perform, observe themselves from a third perspective, or experience the life of characters regardless of time and space (Lin 2001: 78). This technique potentially reflects the Taoist views of the relationships between “Self” and “Other”. Liu Shaojin interprets Zhuangzi’s texts by writing that Zhuangzi’s understanding of the universe can be classified into several levels. The highest level could be defined as “holding a view before the existence of objects” (Liu 2007: 68). Because the concept, “object”, embodies the meaning of the differences among different things, thus, this worldview leads to a unified understanding of the world. The second level features “believing in the existence of objects as well as the same origin of these objects”. Objects, in this level, are still connected (Liu 2007: 68). However, when people focus on the differences among objects, the perfection of Tao or the world will collapse, which is discouraged by Zhuangzi (Liu 2007: 69). In Lin’s storyteller’s narrative, an actor should get rid of his views of the differences among identities in order to perform more identities such as those of the actor himself, difference characters, and even a narrator of the story, at the same time. Arguably, Lin’s assimilation of the Taoist tenet, “nonexistence fosters existence”, releases his actors from the classification of specific fixed identities and enriches the techniques of performing.

Lin’s conclusive text on his understanding of *xiqu* from the Taoist perspective cited in the last paragraph also reflects his comprehension of theatre space. Despite his allusion to Laozi’s well-known sentence, “Out of Tao, One; Out of One, Two; Out of Two, Three; Out of Three, the created universe”, he also argues a similar sentence elsewhere: “I like Taoism. At the very beginning [of my career], I search for inspiration from Taoism. [Taoism accentuates] that nonexistence is existence; existence is nonexistence. An empty stage can express anything” (Chen 2020: 225; Lin 2010b). He further associates this Taoist tenet with the empty stage of *xiqu*: “Empty stage. I like emptiness. This is related to the Chinese Taoism and *Chan*. From a Taoist perspective, emptiness is infinity. An empty stage can express infinite things. The aesthetics of the traditional Chinese *xiqu* bears resemblance [to emptiness]: everything is empty while everything can be expressed. From psychological space to physical space, everything can be expressed” (Xu and Lin 2010). Empty space is deployed in almost every production directed by Lin to break through the limits of the onstage space. In his *The Master Builder*, Lin makes the stage empty with only a red sofa located at the centre of the stage. Although the space of the play keeps changing as it should be “a plainly furnished workroom in Solness’s house” in Act One, “an attractively furnished small living room in Solness’s house” in Act Two, and “a large, broad veranda, part of Solness’s house” in Act Three (Ibsen 1978: 785, 834, 840), Lin’s stage is a completely bare one painted and lit in black, grey, and white, and very few colourful props are featured. Talking about this design, Lin argues, “I like the emptiness of stage. I wish the stage could flow. It is also an influence brought by *xiqu*” (Lin 2014a: 68). What flows on this empty stage is not only physical time and space that audiences are able to recognize such a flow with regard to the performance of the actors, but also the psychological space of the protagonist, Solness. The entire performance is designed by Lin as a very short period before Solness climbs a ladder when Solness recollects his past life (Lin 2016: 37–52). In other words, all the characters, except Solness, only exist in Solness’s recollection and the whole stage can be seen as Solness’s psychological space. The empty stage of this production extends the space onstage physically and psychologically. At various points, Lin in his *Three Sisters Waiting for Godot* deploys an empty space to transcend the borders between texts. In this production, Lin Zhao-hua puts the three sisters on an isolated “island” at the centre of the stage while Estragon and Vladimir at a triangular “sand beach” at the front stage. The stage cannot be considered a completely empty stage but not many specific props depicted in the scripts can be seen. Talking



about the performance of this production, Lin puts forward again the empty stage of *xiqu* and confesses that an “empty stage is not easy but very difficult to handle... everything is revealed by actors’ performances. The actors are starkly exposed on the stage” (Lin 2014b: 299). Thus, the changes between the two plays and inter-textual communications of this production are carried out by the actions of running across the river located around the isolated “island” and between two stages taken by the dual-roles of Pu Cunxin, the actor of Vershinin and Vladimir, and Chen Jianbin, the actor of Estragon and Tuzenbach. A *xiqu*’s bare stage adds more freedom to the performances of Lin’s productions. Further, not all the stages of Lin’s productions are designed as empty ones; some of the others are abstract rather than nearly empty, which might also be partially impacted by Taoism. Lin argues:

Perhaps after the mid-1990s, it occurred to me unclearly that my general artistic pursuits and my understanding of creation and theatre might have gone into a phase of “mountains are once again mountains”. Laozi and Zhuangzi helped me reach the state of “epiphany” and enter a new world of theatre. Before that, I might still take beautiful scenery as the overarching target and pursue beautiful and fancy forms. After that, I realized such a superficial pursuit of the forms of stage does not solve the essential problems of theatre. I will not be a master if audiences can clearly see my designs onstage. A minimalist and abstract stage will deliver a stronger impact to audiences.<sup>12</sup>

Lin’s adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* (Premiered in 2004) could be taken as an example to elaborate briefly on his deployment of an abstract stage space. This production has a 2-meter-tall stage on which the branches of several cherry trees are thrust into the yellow-burlap-made “sky”. What is staged in front of the spectators is a quite narrow interlayer that seems to be blocked by two thick layers of the soil and some relatively taller actors/actresses have to duck their heads while walking. A feeling of oppression is unveiled through this stage design as an anonymous spectator even repeats “oppressed” four times to describe this stage in his/her review article (Liu 2014). Meanwhile, on the soil-like stage grow not only eight bare cherry trees which indicate the space of the orchard but also a dust-covered piano, an exquisite desk clock, a cabinet, some pillows, and several chairs. These pieces of furniture which mark the space of houses are interspersed in the soil-like stage and even some of their bottoms are embedded in the “soil” like floor. The dismantled hierarchical boundary between the serfs and nobles during the transition from a feudal serf society to a new one is visualized on the stage. The legs of little girls stretching out from the left and right sides and the ghost-like women wandering upstage altogether demonstrate the psychological eagerness of Lyubov, the protagonist, to go back to her childhood when she could dance with her friends and see her mom. What Lin’s stage explores in this production is not the real world where the play takes place, but instead the suppressing atmosphere of the story, the equalized identities during a turning point in Russia, and the psychological status of the protagonist.<sup>13</sup> According to Tao Dongfeng, “From the perspective of aesthetic experience,” Zhuangzi’s approach to “the existence out of nonexistence” in the field of artistic creation lies in “minimalism” (Tao 1995: 173–4). Once the most powerful and meaningful features are captured in an artwork, the missing information or messages could be born in the surrounding emptiness. Lin, in these productions, focuses on depicting actor’s representative actions or abstract features of sceneries with an extremely minimalist method. Consequently, more complicated things such as Solness’s physical experience and psychological condition, the interactions between *Three Sisters* and *Waiting for Godot*, and Lin’s criticism on narrow-minded people have the potential to leave the empty space to his audiences to fill and imagine according to their own experiences.

Accordingly, the Taoist “reversal” helps Lin assimilate *xiqu*’s aesthetics in two different methods. As for *xiqu*’s acting aesthetics, Lin treats the boundaries in the acting time, space, and identity, as nonexistent so as to achieve a freer acting system – in contrast to Stanislavski’s theory which requires actors to perform strictly according to the superficial reality. As for *xiqu*’s stage

designs, Lin keeps only the representative features of the performance and abandons most of the concrete decorations in order to ask his audiences to fulfill the surrounding emptiness with their own experiences and understanding.

### **“Fleeting and Indeterminable Tao”: Breaking through the Restraints of Specific Directing Methods**

The dialectics Lin learns from the Taoist “reversal” also contribute to his pursuit of breaking through the restraints of any concrete theatrical schools. Lin alludes to one sentence of Chapter Twenty-Two of *Laozi* to demonstrate his thoughts about directing: “[The Taoist sage] is free from self-assertion, and therefore he is distinguished; from self-boasting, and therefore his merit is acknowledged’... This is also beneficial to my self-cultivation” (Lin 2017: 33). This sentence teaches Lin that he should not be satisfied with what he has achieved but needs to keep being modest so as to acquire the possibilities to promote his directing aesthetics. He, in *The Master Builder*, concentrates on expressing a similar argument. In this production, Lin asks Pu Cunxin, the actor of the protagonist Solness, to climb up a high ladder the top of which is designed to be higher than the ceiling and cannot be seen by the audiences, so Pu is considered always in an action of climbing rather than that of reaching the top. Pu’s symbolically continuous climbing action is illustrated by Lin as his own attitude towards his job: “I don’t want to be a master. Master means that he is already at the top of the mountain while I still want to climb higher” (Tian 2018a). Lin’s directing experiences parallel this pursuit well, which is usually praised by some Chinese journalists and scholars as “each production has its own unique features” (Gu 2018b: III). This notion should be traced back to one of his most respectable predecessors, Jiao Juyin. Considered the initiator of “The School of Chinese Theatre”, Jiao’s directing aesthetics greatly influenced Lin’s attitude towards theatre. In 1985, Su Min and some other distinguished Chinese scholars published a book to study the directing aesthetics of Jiao systematically. They argue:

Jiao Juyin always shows an innovative attitude towards his artistic practices. He “gets rid of the old-fashioned elements of the last production and innovates the valuable ones in the subsequent praxis”, “takes the uniqueness of a theatrical genre as the foundation”, and “assimilates various features from outside”, thus, he frames a uniquely artistic way that “each production has its own unique features”. Suppose we agree that artists are respected for their uniqueness and the pursuits of “being different from others”, Jiao’s productions are even different from the previous ones of his own. He is an artist who always holds a passion and wishes to pursue something new (Su et al. 1985: 190).

Considered one of the most loyal disciples of Jiao’s directing aesthetics, Lin always endows each of his productions with unique features as well. Talking about the idea that “each production has its own unique features”, Lin confesses he “does not repeat the productions of other directors or that of his own” (Zhu and Wang 2013). To list a few, Lin started to explore “dual structure acting” in his *Absolute Signal* (Juedui xinhao 绝对信号, premiered in 1982), ask each of his actors to prepare a fifteen-minute long improvisational performance in *Bus Stop* (Che-zhan 车站, premiered in 1983), deploy Chinese folk arts and stream of consciousness in *Wild Man*, create the theatre-fete-cum-fairground *93 Nights of Theatrical Karaoke* (93 xiju kala OK zhiye 93戏剧卡拉OK之夜, 1993) by putting short performances with food carts in the same space, apply pop cultures and films to *Faust* (Fushide 浮士德, premiered in 1994), create *Old Tales Retold* (Gushi xinbian 故事新编, premiered in 2000) and *Richard III* (Licha sanshi 理查三世, premiered in 2001) by means of devised theatre, and so on.<sup>14</sup> Pu Cunxin comments on Lin, “Lin Zhaohua keeps pushing himself, experimenting, and exploring [news ways of creating productions]” (Sina 2014). Shang Zhenshui conveys, “Lin Zhaohua challenges innumerable restrictions while adapting [Maeterlinck’s *The Blind*]” (Lin 2014b, 384). Wu Zuguang states that Lin “holds an ambition to challenge and reform the realism that has dominated Chinese theatre

for decades...In creating *Bus Stop* and *Wild Man*, collaborating with Gao Xingjian, Lin started exploring multivocality and epic theatre" (Lin 2014a, 169–170). The continuous innovations in Lin's productions make him always energetic and an "evergreen tree" of the field of Chinese *huaju*. The continuous innovations in Lin's productions make him always energetic and an "evergreen tree" of the field of Chinese *huaju*.

Apart from the influence of the Taoist "reversal" on Lin's modest attitude to the general aesthetics of his productions, Laozi's descriptions of the form of Tao, the origin of the world, are cited by Lin to theorize his opinions about theatrical schools or theories. Lin conveys:

What is Tao? [Tao] can only be felt rather than delivered by speeches. Laozi says Tao is the Fleeting and indeterminable. I reinterpret this ancient argument from a contemporary perspective: Tao can also be seen as a kind of telepathy. When people can naturally find the harmony between their own psychological states and the rhythm of the cosmos, they achieve a balance (Lin 2017: 33–4).

"Tao is the Fleeting and indeterminable" is extracted from Chapter Fourteen of *Laozi* in which Laozi describes the features of Tao (Chen 2020: 113). Synonymous with Lin's allusion to the concept, "epiphany", of *Chan* Buddhism, his utilization of the indeterminable Tao cannot be simply interpreted as his comprehension of life but should be put into the realm of directing aesthetics. In 1986, a video recording of Lin's adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Schweyk in the Second World War* (Erci dazhan zhong de shuaike 二次大战中的帅克, premiered in 1986), played at the Hong Kong International Brecht Seminar, attracted the attention of Jurgen Flimm, the chair of Thalia Theatre in Hamburg, who subsequently invited Lin to his theatre to direct *Wild Man* in 1988. Lin firstly teaches German actors to practice the Taoist *qigong* as he writes on his directing notes: "The secret of the Taoist kung fu is 'inner peace'... 'Silence' enables an individual to replace complicated thoughts with only one idea. One thinks about one issue, focuses on one target, one sound, one picture, one character, or one beautiful thing, then he succeeds in getting rid of anything else... Finally, one reaches the state of being a part of the universe [that no boundaries exist between him and the external world]".<sup>15</sup> Such a kind of practice, according to Lin, aims to help the actors enter a psychological state of unconsciousness. The actors relaxedly move their bodies along with the music. Lin points out the target of asking these German actors to practice *qigong*: "I do not want them to perform with standardized actions" (Lin 2014b: 149). We do not know what "standardized actions" were performed by those German actors, but we know Lin equally disliked every stylistic "hat" put on his head (Ferrari 2012: 27). Although he received the most orthodox training in Stanislavski's acting system, Lin spent all his directing life challenging this theatrical school. He also refuses to be classified as a member of the avant-garde contingent even though he is considered one of the most experimental directors in China (Ferrari 2012: 27). Facing a question about the classifications of his directing aesthetics, Lin says that it pertains to "free theatrical aesthetics" (Lin 2001: 82). This argument means that Lin is not restricted by any specific theatrical schools, but directs dramas according to his own feelings about the relationships between the performances and the world. Countless times, when asked about his deployment of a specific technique in his praxes, he does not know how to answer, because these techniques cannot be traced to any theories but Lin's own devising practices.

Similar to Lin's contemporary understanding of the Taoist connections between human beings and the universe, Lin's devising techniques are initiated from the perspective of human beings themselves instead of any theories. Early in 1980 while he was directing *Toast for Happiness* (Weile xingfu ganbei 为了幸福干杯, premiered in 1980), Lin replaced the realistic scenery with an abstract one only for interest. The pursuits of interest also push Lin to use a little girl to play the role of Hitler in *Schweyk in the Second World War* and deploy a real tree on the stage of *Bird-men*; he even wants to put *Richard III* in a playground and every murder or deception depicted in the play is performed as playing a game. Lin Jianming, the consultant of Lin's adaptation of

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, conveys on Lin's directing aesthetics, "Actually, the children's game is a natural and pure theatre game" (Li 1992: 243). During an interview with Li Ruru, Lin puts forward, "Theatre is actually a game" (CAHSS Webteam 2015). Taking *Richard III* as an example, Lin first asks his actors to play various Chinese children's games during the rehearsal and selects some of the games that would be applicable to present the plots. There are at least fifteen games such as "Hawk and Chicks", "One, Two, Three, Wooden Man", "Pets Play Ball", "Rock, Paper, Scissors", and among others, adopted in the performance. For example, when Richard III talks about his aspiration of killing those who could hinder his way toward the throne, he is playing a game, called "Hawk and Chicks", as he is a hawk, catching and "eating" those pitiful chick-like aristocrats. Another game, entitled "One, Two, Three, Wooden Man", is deployed in the scene when two murderers are assigned by Richard III to kill his brother, Clarence. "One, Two, Three, Wooden Man" needs a man facing a wall to speak aloud "One, Two, Three, Wooden Man" according to his/her own speed and several men approaching him/her from behind silently. When the first man finishes speaking the sentence, he can turn his head around to look at the others. Meanwhile, the others should freeze themselves as wooden men. If someone moves while being starred by the first man, he/she loses. If the first man is touched by any one of the others, he/she loses. In Lin's modified game, Clarence acted as the first man with his eyes covered by his own hands in the middle of a transparent tent, a prop indicating the tower where he was jailed. He had to keep talking with 2 murderers approaching him respectively from right and left and to turn his head to look at them so that those who were stared at should go back outside the tent. Once he was distracted by the words of the first murderer and was begging for life, the second murderer stabbed him from the other side and uttered the text similar to the original text, "Look behind you, my lord" (Shakespeare 2008: 59). The cruel murders are treated as games by Lin's actors. These games deployed by Lin not only add a sense of amusement to this production, but also add a new theme to it: "Conspiracies are not dreadful. Being insensitive to conspiracies is dreadful, because [it means] that you are enclosed by conspirators" (Zhang and Lin 2003: 8). The game is a fountainhead of Lin's directing aesthetics.

According to Johan Huizinga, "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (Huizinga 1980: 1). Thus, the game is a preliminary activity deeply rooted in the nature of human beings or even all animals, which marks the natural connections between human beings and the world accentuated by Taoism. Zhong Tai argues that "being detached from human beings' bias and communicating directly to the world" (*yi ming* 以明) is one of the overarching ways to approach Tao (Zhong 2022: 24). Therefore, Lin takes his interest and psychological state of playing games as the motivations for directing dramas, bridging his productions with nature or the universe seamlessly and resonating with his understanding of the Taoist arguments on human-world relationships. However, this "epiphanic" or "telepathic" directing aesthetics does not mean Lin despises theatrical theories. On the contrary, he reads academic books widely, such as those about Stanislavski, Bertolt Brecht, Martin Esslin, Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, etc (Zhang and Lin 2003: 5).<sup>16</sup> In his essay, "A Soliloquy Written at My 'Kennel'", Lin writes down one of his most famous arguments: "'Expressing the reality', 'expressing the essence', idealism, materialism, symbolism, absurdism, modernism, post-modernism, and even post-post-modernism, etc. [I] ask all of them to stand around me, waiting for the birth of babies—I create my theatre aesthetics" (Lin 1998: 10-1). This text, accompanied by Lin's utilization of the Taoist *qigong* to release his actors from specific acting systems, could be interpreted as another way of pursuing Tao—"understanding the nature of every object while preventing subjectivity" (*yuwuhuazhe*, *yibuhua* 与物化者, 一不化也) (Wang 2021: 268). Xu Fuguan interprets the title of the first chapter, "Wandering Where You Will" (*Xiaoyao you* 逍遥游), by saying, "Zhuangzi's 'you' embodies the meaning of

'gaming'. The "gaming" here does not denote any specific games but reflects the free activity or the free spirit exposed within 'gaming'" (Xu 2010: 69–70). "Gaming" denotes Lin's free will in treating different theatrical conditions. He does not directly use the forms of theatrical theories but absorbs and "digests" them to create a new one for a specific production based on his own comprehension of performance. Hence, the Taoist philosophy, to some extent, inspires Lin to dismantle the boundaries among different theatrical schools, concepts, and personal thoughts in order to contribute to the continuous innovations of his directing aesthetics and praxes.

### Conclusion

Bertrand Russell comments on Taoism, "Lao-Tze's [or Laozi's] book, or rather the book attributed to him is very short, but his ideas were developed by his disciple Chuang-Tze [or Zhuangzi], who is more interesting than his master. The philosophy which both advocated was one of freedom" (Russell 1922: 188). Lin's various utilizations of the Taoist tenets can be altogether considered as his pursuit of Taoist freedom. He keeps breaking through the fixed things and ideas such as the political and cultural hegemonies in China, the old forms of *xiqu*, dominant realist tradition of *huaju*, and even the productions that were just created by him. For Lin, once one production is created or one argument is put forward, it is already old-fashioned and starts to limit his creative mind. By continuously looking into the non-existence, Lin succeeds in deconstructing the boundaries between the past and the present, different cultures inside China, and even the Chinese cultures and others'.

From a perspective of new-intercultural performance, theatre in the "East" has been suffering from the hegemonic cultures of the "West" for centuries. Penny Farfan and Ric Knowles in 2011 proposed, "...there is room for more globally syncretic and historically grounded understandings of intercultural performance as something that did not begin or end with Western modernism, and that does not simply involve Western appropriations of the Other" (Farfan and Knowles n.p.). Subsequently, the theatre artists from the "East" were encouraged to "weave" different traditions in their praxes based on their own identities and fight against the "Western" dominance in the field of intercultural performance. However, in 2018, Tian Min still pointed out that the movements of (new)intercultural performance "remain[ed] theoretically Eurocentric and geopolitically Western-centred" (Tian 2018b: 1). Although some distinguished "Eastern" scholars such as Rustom Bharucha (India) put forward some theories that were internationally influential, the number of them is still far smaller than that of the "Western" theories. Hence, accentuating the Taoist influence on Lin's directing experiences and directing aesthetics can contribute to the establishment of a Chinese-centred theory of intercultural performance. An intercultural theory initiated based on traditional Chinese philosophy could be considered one of the voices to balance the overwhelmingly dominant "Western" intercultural theories. Further, highlighting the significance of transcending the classifications of different concepts as well as objects, the arguments of intercultural performance based on Taoism could provide a united and equal view towards different cultures.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> My interview with Lin Weiyu through the online call of WeChat on 17 June 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> My interview with Lin Weiyu through the online call of WeChat on 17 June 2022.
- <sup>3</sup> *Qigong* is a sub-genre of Taoist *kung fu*. Practicing *qigong* does not require the practitioners to move their bodies fast but maintain a static gesture to clear their minds, which reverberates with Indian yoga or Buddhist meditation.
- <sup>4</sup> Lin also alludes a Taoist tenet, “achieving by doing nothing”, to express the same opinion. See Lin, Zhaohua. 2001. “*Xiju de shengmingli* [The Vitality of Theatre].” *Literature & Art Studies* (3):76–84.
- <sup>5</sup> 370,000 CNY was almost equal to 44,700 USD in 1998. The average annual salary of a Beijing citizen was around 12,285 CNY in 1998.
- <sup>6</sup> Lin’s winning of The Theatre Academy Awards (Directing Award) is mentioned by himself in one of his own essays. See Lin also alludes a Taoist tenet, “achieving by doing nothing”, to express the same opinion. See Lin, Zhaohua. 2001. “*Xiju de shengmingli* [The Vitality of Theatre].” *Literature & Art Studies* (3):76–84.
- <sup>7</sup> My interview with Lin Weiyu through the online call of WeChat on 7 February 2024.
- <sup>8</sup> The spoken drama was considered a civilized art in contrast to indigenous Chinese theatre which was “obscene” during the early twentieth century. See Fu, Jin. 2021. *A History of Chinese Theatre in the 20th Century III*. London and New York: Routledge.
- <sup>9</sup> *Verfremdungseffekt* (or Alienation Effect) is a theatrical concept incepted by Bertolt Brecht. This concept denotes a situation where actors do not pretend that they are the characters, thus, their audiences are not completely moved by the performances onstage but are able to think about the performances reasonably. A distance is created between the performance and audiences.
- <sup>10</sup> These are three main ways put forward by Lin to achieve “dual-structure acting”. There are also some other ways, such as performing ancient or imaginary stories with contemporary gestures, sitting on the sides of stage to witness other characters’ performances, performing as rehearsing with texts in hands, and performing as script reading, experimented by Lin to achieve the same effect.
- <sup>11</sup> More illustrations about three ways to achieve Lin’s “dual-structure acting” can be seen in Lin Weiyu’s essay. See Lin, Weiyu. 2010a. “‘*zenme shuo*’ ‘*shuo shenme*’ ‘*shuo shi shenme*’: *zhongguo dangdai juchang daoyan lin zhaohua de daobiaoyan meixue* [How to Perform What to Perform What is Performance Itself: Directing-Acting Aesthetics of Chinese Contemporary Theatre Director – Lin Zhaohua].” *Taipei Theatre Journal* (11): 269–327.
- <sup>12</sup> “Mountains are again mountains” is a part of a *Chan* Buddhist argument put forward by a Chinese monk, Qingyuan Xingsi (671–740). He says three states of studying *Chan*: At the beginning one studies *Chan*, he sees mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after one gains insight through the teachings of a master, he sees mountains are no longer mountains and waters are no longer waters; after epiphany, he sees mountains are once again mountains and waters are once again waters. Lin uses this text here to illustrate that he gets rid of the superficial forms of stage and pursues the essential meanings of it. See Lin, Zhaohua. 2014a. *Daoyan xiaorenshu: kanxi* [Comic Book of Lin Zhaohua: Watching Dramas]. Beijing: The Writers Publishing House, 62.
- <sup>13</sup> More illustrations about the stage design of Lin’s *The Cherry Orchard* can be seen in Chengyun Zhao’s essay. See Zhao, Chengyun. 2024. “Directing Dramas is Returning Hometown: Reading Lin Zhaohua’s *The Cherry Orchard* from the Perspective of the Taoist Freedom, *Xiaoyao*.” *Theatre Academy* 2 (1):73–95. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10829736>.
- <sup>14</sup> “Improvisational performance” is an experimental performing technique which asks actors to perform without scripts, thus, these actors can perform according to their momentary feelings or their audiences’ responses. Their speeches and actions vary in different performances. “Stream of consciousness” was first a narrative mode used in novel writing which explores a narrator’s multitudinous thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind. In theatre making, stream of consciousness is deployed to describe the praxes that perform psychological movements rather than physical actions. “Devised theatre” references a collective creation of theatre in which every member equally contribute to the creation of a production. No director or playwright is highlighted in devised theatre.
- <sup>15</sup> The directing notes of Lin Zhaohua. Accessed on 28 February 28, 2024.
- <sup>16</sup> These theorists are not listed chronologically in that they were introduced into China almost at the same time after the proclamation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy.



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# Towards a New Poetics of Puritanism: Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations*

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**Abstract:** Heirs of the Renaissance, the Puritans valued the ancient classics, esteemed such moderns as Spenser, Sidney, and later Milton, and of course were in sympathy with the Renaissance belief in the ethical foundation of poetry. With such a tradition behind them, and living intensely in the present, they had a situation favorable to a high order of religious poetry. While occupied with the practical demands of early settlement in the colonial wilderness of North America, the Puritans observed an austere religion founded on the Biblical notion of the original sin. As a 17<sup>th</sup>-century American Metaphysical poet, Edward Taylor fuses thought and feeling with fresh and tense language. The research attempts to study how Taylor combines the religious meditational traditions and Biblical typology, a conservative sense of parallels between the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*, in his religious poetry, *Preparatory Meditations*. I argue that Edward Taylor, the pastor and poet, draws on verbal piety as revealed in the universe of his religious poetry to reassert the union of Godhead and manhood in the Word. Besides, Metaphysical wit serves as a delight for the daily life surrounded by dangers and wilderness in North America during early colonial period. Thus, as Hephaestus forges a brave shield for Achilles under the supplication of Thetis, so does Edward Taylor as a pastor-poet forge a new poetics of Puritanism out of colonial barrenness, one that fuses Biblical typology and lyrical poetry.

**Keywords:** Edward Taylor, *Preparatory Meditations*, Puritanism, Poetics, American colonial period, Anne Bradstreet, Typology, Metaphysical wit, early American literature, religious poetry

My Glorious Lord thy work upon my hand  
A work so greate and doth so Ample grow  
Too larg to be by my Souls limits spand.  
Lord let me to thy Angell Palace goe  
To borrow thence Angelick Organs bright.  
To play thy praises with theses pipes aright.  
  
You Holy Angells lend yee mee your Skill.  
Your Organs set and fill them up well stuf  
With Christs rich praises whose lips do distill  
Upon his Spouse such ravishing dewes to gust  
With Silver Metaphors and Tropes bedlight.  
How fair, how pleasant art, Love, for delight?  
  
Which Rhetorick of thine my Lord descry  
Such influences from thy Spouses face  
That do upon me run and raise thy Joy  
Above my narrow Fancy to uncase.

But yet demands my praise so high, so much  
The which my narrow pipe can neer tune such.

Hence I come to your doors bright Starrs on high  
And beg you to imply your pipes herein.  
Winde musick makes the Sweetest Melody.  
I'll with my little pipe thy praises sing.  
Accept I pray and what for this I borrow,  
I'll pay thee more when rise on heavens morrow.

(*Preparatory Meditations* 2.153)

Heirs of the Renaissance, the Puritans valued the ancient classics, esteemed such moderns as Spenser, Sidney, and later Milton, and of course were in sympathy with the Renaissance belief in the ethical foundation of poetry. With such a tradition behind them, and living intensely in the present, they had, it would seem to be, a situation favorable to a high order of religious poetry. For their failure to publish a body of epic and lyric poetry, one must look for reasons other than religious hostility, as towards theater and play in the Elizabethan period. In point of fact, one reason has already been suggested: they were excessively absorbed in and utterly occupied with the practical demands of early settlement in the colonial wilderness of North America. At the same time, they were too occupied in vigilantly observing an austere religion, which made them fearful of the dangers latent in the senses and passions that poetry may tend to cultivate, as proposed by Plato in his renowned classic of philosophical studies, *The Republic*. Besides, in their zealous pursuit for solid substance of thought, they tended to undervalue the ultimate pursuit for aesthetic expression. By the same token, the Puritan settlers by and large lacked sufficient familiarity with traditional literary arts to which they had difficulty finding appropriate access in the wilderness of North America during the early colonial period. In light of aesthetics and poetic experiment, the overall impression of Puritan literary endeavors in the seventeenth century in North America during the colonial period appears to suffer some sort of deficiency or unsophisticatedness as far as aesthetics and poetics are concerned.

Without a doubt, the early settlers made an ominous and unhealthy beginning in terms of literary adventures as well as poetic engagement. For instance, in the *Bay Psalm Book*, three ministers joined in a literal translation of the Psalms of the Bible, which was not even intended to be poetry at all but rather to be religious material in itself. That is to say, the Psalms of the Bible were rendered with a deliberate purpose to be adjusted to the tunes sung in the churches in order to serve religious rituals and practices. As a result, the subordination of the Puritans' poetry's aesthetic quality to the doctrine of melody and musicology that serves the needs of religious gatherings appears to be somehow striking. The exploitation of poetic artistry and obsession with doctrinal juxtaposition manifests itself in the best-sellers of Puritan verse. For example, Michael Wigglesworth's "The Day of Doom: or, A Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgment" became a best-selling classic in Puritan New England for almost a century after it was first published in 1662 by Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson. Although it is not devoid of poetic power and prosodic merits, on the whole it is little more than versified Calvinism which the pious churchgoers could readily learn by heart because of its frequent textual allusions to the Christian scriptures with which the Puritans were so familiar. On the other hand, as for Anne Bradstreet, it is generally admitted that there are vastly more poetic merits in her literary attempts. Although she was largely given to imitating her literary and poetic models in the old world, that is, the British poets on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, she had an effectively simple way of her own female as well as domestic poetics that characterizes a convergence of natural life and religious belief during the colonial period in North America. The reader can see that she was capable of a free genuine expression, though she refrained herself from going beyond the limits set by the standard of social decorum in her individual poetic adventures.

Undeniably, the one poet who plainly emerges above the rest of the Puritans during the early colonial period is no other than Edward Taylor (c. 1642–1729), who published only a little in his lifetime but left in his manuscripts a large collection of verse virtually unknown till the twentieth century. He is a 17<sup>th</sup>-century American Metaphysical poet, whose poetry features “bold metaphysical juxtaposition of thought and image” (Brumm 1972, 192), which in a lot of respects is reminiscent of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, and even some other English poets of the time. Through fresh and tense language which magically and creatively fuses thought as well as feeling, Edward Taylor’s Puritan religious poetry showed that it could “not only be devout in its orthodox substance,” but it could also be “vigorous, passionate, and sometimes even ecstatic in its expression” (Foerster 15). As far as meditational tradition is concerned, private meditational poetry was not originally designed for audience other than God Himself. As such, the poet who was engaged in religious contemplations was apparently prevalent in early colonial New England. For instance, in “Contemplations,” Anne Bradstreet (1612–1772) made use of public conventional emblems and well-known biblical stories to reshape the public features of her materials into a very personal and original meditation on the conflict within herself between pride and humility. Emblems in verse—epigrammatic observations on a picture depicting an idea—appealed to Puritan poets, especially in private poems similar to “Contemplations,” in which Bradstreet speaks of a flowing river as “Thou Emblem true, of what I count the best, / O could I lead my Rivolets to rest, / So may we press to that vast mansion, ever blest” (Bradstreet “Contemplations,” stanza 23).

Just how ingenious a Puritan poet could be in the creation of emblems is evident in the private meditations of Edward Taylor. Far from demonstrating derivativeness or the exhaustion of the emblem tradition, Taylor’s poems often reveal a startling capacity to generate innovative emblems. In “Meditation 1.8,” for example, the poet interrelates macrocosm and microcosm through a series of parallel emblems: the picture of a downed birdlike soul in a cage-like body, which becomes the picture of a starving creature unable to reach the crumb-like stars at the “bottom” of the barrel-like heavens, which becomes the picture of a potential saint being nourished by an overflow from God’s bowels in the inverted crystal meal bowl of the starry heavens. Likewise, in “Meditation 2.3” Taylor uses his own face as an emblem; it is described in detail as if it were a natural terrain characterized by topography, climate, flora, and fauna, namely natural elements found on the native land and wilderness of North America during early colonial settlement.

This liveliness of the emblem tradition is only one feature of the abundant artistic creativity evident in Edward Taylor’s religious poetry. Taylor’s current reputation, however, derives from 20<sup>th</sup>-century critics’ high regard and evaluation for his *Preparatory Meditations*, more than two hundred private poems he wrote in two series and in apparent conjunction with certain of the religious sermons that he consciously and conscientiously prepares for his flock during church gatherings. Exhibiting the meditational traditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these devotional poems were written in preparation for Taylor’s administration of the Lord’s Supper, although evidence indicates that several of these works were occasional poems and that he revised and recast a number of the poems at later times.<sup>1</sup> Several of them can be grouped into clusters; for example, in the Second Series, “Meditation 1” to “Meditation 30” concern biblical typology and “Meditation 115” to “Meditation 133” concern the allegory of Canticles.

Besides meditational traditions and biblical typology and allegory, these poems also reflect the verbal ingenuity of seventeenth-century English “metaphysical” poetry. They are none the less far from being merely derivative works. Among their idiosyncratic poetic features departing from the prosodic examples established by the British “metaphysical” poets rests a deliberately executed decorum of imperfection. That is to say, the poet tends to limit and confine himself to ineffectual amplification when he speaks of God. To put it another way, when the poet addresses to God, he tends to engage in a well-managed rhetoric that imposes self-diminishment upon the poet himself. When the pastor and poet is engaged in describing himself or the postlapsarian humanity as a



whole, Biblical implications tend to overflow onto the stanzas. Besides, in contrast to George Herbert (1593–1633), English metaphysical poet and clergyman, whose poems, collected in *The Temple*, express a sweet and trusting friendliness with God, Edward Taylor's poems reveal his adherence to an exclusionist typological system—a conservative sense of parallels between the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. Both the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament* are essentially completed with Jesus Christ and so do not centrally include the saint, who at best is a peripheral participant in the typological scheme.

In addition, with an ambivalence characteristic of the Puritan belief and culture, Edward Taylor departs from the poetic examples well established by the British “metaphysical” poets of the old world in Great Britain. That is, the pastor-poet tends to precariously balance the assertion of poetic self and the abrogation of this assertion, so much so that the poet is curiously within and outside his poem he is writing at the same time. In other words, Taylor manages the tension between cultural, theological restraints and personal emotion by creating through a pyrotechnic use of verbal nuance a liminal space between despair and presumption. As such it is appropriate for him to tend to conclude his meditation uncertainly in the subjunctive mode, that is to say, in petition rather than in resolution in front of God the Almighty. Most of the time, Taylor's poems manifest a verbal ingenuity designed to attract the attention of God to the underlying potentiality of the childlike poet's “Lisp of Non-sense,” so much so that God, the omniscient and the omnipotent, will transform the postlapsarian lisp through grace and make the poet an adopted child capable of singing God's praise in genuinely adroit poetry.

Initial interests in Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations* emphasized theme, theology, intellectual heritage and aesthetic theory. These interpretive concerns continue to be of great interest in our times, although the exuberant as well as pyrotechnical imagery in Edward Taylor's poetic enterprise tends to elude precise critical categorization and understanding. Generally speaking, the imagery in Taylor's verse is thought to reflect a “baroque” (Keller 1975, 161–188) and free-associative literary and poetic style. The Baroque style used contrast, movement, exuberant detail, deep colour, grandeur, and surprise to achieve a sense of awe in front of imperative divine power. The style began at the start of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Rome; then, it spread rapidly to France, northern Italy, Spain, and Portugal; lastly, the style was disseminated to as far as Austria, southern Germany, and Russia. By the 1730s, it had evolved into an even more flamboyant style, called *rocaille* or *Rococo*, which appeared in France and Central Europe until the mid to late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Edward Taylor draws on such a highly decorative style in his poetic attempts to bring about a whole new world in the wild nature of North America during the early colonial period. The subtle and nuanced convergence of the twain, namely the “baroque” style as the formal expression and the natural “wilderness” of North America as the fundamental concern and content of the poetry, leads Huang Chung-Ying to dub Edward Taylor's poetic style as “wilderness baroque” (Huang 36).

However, such a notion of “wilderness baroque” is sometimes compromised or counterbalanced by the exemplary meditations, in which Edward Taylor manages to conjure up an intricate artistic integrity, a developmental consistency of imagery, and a logical pattern of transition based on aesthetics, theology, and science. Take “Meditation 2.10” for example. Taylor easily blends together Biblical typology and 17<sup>th</sup>-century scientific data on comets to demonstrate divine harmony between the will of God high up in Heaven and the phenomena down here in of the mundane world on earth. By the same token, Taylor's abundant references in “Meditation 2.26” to specific herbs are far from being gratuitous or random; on the contrary, they contribute to forming an underlying pattern informed by a reiterated tripartite progression from purgation, through improving health, to regeneration in the end. In a like manner, the apparently random shifting from image to image in “Meditation 2.25” actually evinces an underlying unity derived from the traditions of Biblical exegesis typical of the poet's times. Also, in “Meditation 1.39” the proliferation of Taylor's imagery appears to be rather baroque and free-associative, yet actually it suggests a se-

quential narrative plot as a whole: That the sick poet is in urgent need of Jesus Christ the Physician to cure him. In a similar timbre, the poet appeals to Christ the Advocate to plead his case for the transgressions committed by the poet's animal passions during his time of illness. When occasions arise, the poet invokes Jesus Christ the Blacksmith to forge through the crucifixion "Nails made of heavenly Steel, more Choice than gold / Drove home, Well Clencht," so as to pen and curb the animal passions of the poet's carnal body for good. More often than not, in *Preparatory Meditations* these transitions involving elements of aesthetics, theology, and science are elliptical and elusive as a result of the personal associations—be they biographical, social, or doctrinal—in Edward Taylor's highly metaphysical poetry that attends to both heavenly divinity and earthly humanity.

On the other hand, the heart or will of the humankind remains at the center of Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations*.<sup>2</sup> Taylor turned to the universe of poetry because it was private and allowed him to concentrate less on the logic of rational comprehension and more on the affectional dimensions of the human heart. In the verbal world of poetry, one might speculate that the colonial American poet, pastor and physician of English origin might find release from the confining discipline of public sermons that he had to administer for his flock at church gatherings. At the very least, the universe of poesy doubtless provided the devoted Puritan pastor with an opportunity and a stint to delve into the question of his very own salvation at the heavenly court of the final judgement. As textually showcased in the *Preparatory Meditations*, Taylor's pent-up, heartfelt feelings tended to overflow into his restraining rhetorical structures, and even occasionally onto the meter and rhyme of his well-crafted stanzas. Of course, Taylor never totally abandoned reason and ration in his poetic undertaking. For the American poet of early colonial period, rationality *per se* comprises part of the inherent nature of words. What's more, the poet did take to exercising rational restraint, perhaps in imitation of the underlying rational order of the Word's poetic genesis of the universe by the divine God, through the confining discipline of stanzaic form, meter, and rhyme.

Nevertheless, it was for its capacity to convey his deep love of God that drives Edward Taylor the Puritan pastor-poet to write his religious sermons in the form of poetry. In this particular mode of literary expression, he sought "To tend [the] Lord in all admiring Style" (Taylor 1960, 1.41). Such a style, hopefully arising from a heart responding to grace, would communicate his deepest love for the divine power in Heaven. Because the "Magnificence of the Author is blessed by his Works," Taylor engaged himself in the expression of the self in his pious poetry by means of some reflections, albeit obscure at times, of the spiritual condition of his very own soul. Without the grace and favor of timely divinity, the "Quaint Metaphors" and "Sparkling Eloquence" of his poetic devotion to God indeed "would appeare as dawbing pearls with mud" (Taylor 1960, 1.13). In stark contrast, were the poet animated by the Word's inspiring art, he would more readily approximate, though never fully achieve in this human world, a poetic style that mirrors this divine Love—an "all admiring Style" embraced by the pastor and poet of Puritanism. As such, his poetic attempts, no longer "dawbing pearls with mud," would imitate the artistry of the Word: "A heap of Pearls is precious: but they shall / When set by Art Excel" (Taylor 1960, 1.19).

On the other hand, it is evident that the meditative structure permitted the poet to dwell on his beloved theme of Love. Since this system of personal piety was to elicit the movement of the will, it was necessarily suited to the expression of love, namely human heart's chief affection. As a matter of fact, according to the Salesian spirit of meditation, which differs from the Jesuit spirit in degree of intellectuality and emotional tumult, the language of pious contemplation was to originate in the heart's love which it reflects. Without a doubt, religious meditations as spiritual sources speak volumes for Edward Taylor's sacred creation of poetry although his sacred creation of poetry was founded on the natural landscape as well as secular human world on earth during a time of primitive environment.

In the wake of the Salesian meditation, Edward Taylor modified the traditional meditative climax, wherein by means of the aroused will, the entire soul "is lifted up to speak with God in

sacred colloquy and to hear God speak to man in turn" (Martz 145–47). As such, in its entirety each poem of the *Preparatory Meditations* represents Taylor's spiritual and verbal conversation with God the Almighty, but nowhere in these poems does God Himself speak directly to the poet. Taylor believed that God's communication to His elect is continuous and that, in response to his grace, the very language of the saint's own heart reflects the artistry of the Logos/Word; for, the will of the saint is the musical instrument God plays in praise of Himself. In other words, Taylor looked to his own art for a sign of God's voice to himself. As a result, many of his poems open with a search for words end up communicating the active desire of the poet's will to be the passive recipient of grace from God.

Consequently, Edward Taylor as a Puritan pastor and poet perceived a real correspondence between human words and the divine Word. Just as the Word itself mediates between God and man, man's words on earth in response to grace can somehow manage to mediate, through the divine power of the Word, between mankind and God:

Thou art my Medium to God, Thou art  
My Medium of Worship done to thee,  
And of Divine Communion, Sweet heart!  
Oh Heavenly intercourse! (Taylor 1960, 2.20)

When they are motivated by divine grace and when they reflect and are offered the grace of Jesus Christ, in whom Godhead and manhood are eternally united, man's pious words provide a middle point, at which, in a figurative sense, God and man meet in a medium of mutual love between each other.

In other words, Edward Taylor saw the pious language of the heart as a verbal suspension between man and God. Words communicate the heart's love, and since thought and action are equivalent to language, words provide in a sense the only means whereby a man can express himself to God. Accordingly, "Such *verbal piety* reasserts the union of Godhead and manhood in the Word" (Scheick 125, emphases mine), as expressed in the first two stanzas of *Preparatory Meditations*:

My Blessed Lord, that Golden Linck that joyns  
My Soule, and thee, outblossoms on't this Spruce  
Pearl Pronown My more spirituouse than wines,  
Rooted in Rich Relation, Graces Sluce.  
This little Voice feast mee with fatter Sweets  
Than all the Stars that pave the Heavens Streets.  
It hands me All, my heart, and hand to thee  
And up doth lodge them in thy persons Lodge  
And as a Golden bridge ore it to mee  
Thee, and thine All to me, and never dodge.  
In this small Ship a mutual Intrest sayles  
From Heaven and Earth, by th'holy Spirits gales.

(Taylor 1960, 2.35)

It was through the poetic expression of his Puritan beliefs that Edward Taylor, pastor and poet of Jesus Christ, endeavored to tend his Lord "in all admiring Style." In his ability to manifest his poetic aims, especially in the realization of a stylistic integration of the sublime and the ordinary, lay the evidence of his salvation. Since words are derived from the will, a converted heart will spawn a certain degree of gracious verbal eloquence based not on superficial rhetoric but on the radical meaning beneath all rhetoric, on the integrating presence of divine love both in the soul and in the world. It is Taylor's effort to discern the spiritual state of his will through the looking Glass of his poetic stuttering utterances, which inform the dramatic sense of anxiety one feels in his religious meditations. Admittedly, the words in Taylor's religious and poetic meditations are themselves no other than events, uncertain events which motivated Taylor, in spite of his unrelenting effort to

express his love in pious poetry, to keep the quest and questioning of his spiritual condition suspended. He never permitted himself to cross the verbal bridge of his meditations in order to arrive at complete spiritual resolution or mystical assurance. On the contrary, Taylor keeps inscribing his “inscape” (Reiter 173)—that is to say, “his heartfelt, personal narrative of an ingrained faith and an unwavering devotion” (Scheick 168). As a result, Taylor was able to achieve the very difficult mission of his religious quest, namely to make a successful poem out of Biblical typology in the vast wilderness of North America.

For Edward Taylor the devoted pastor and creative poet, the types of the *Old Testament*—persons, things, and events—are signs, often glorious signs in themselves, which are surpassed, overshadowed, excelled, and sometimes even abrogated, by that which they typify or signify. “For the Type is but the Signum of the Antitype,” as he elucidates in *Upon the Types of the Old Testament*:

Because of the Relation that there is between the Type, & Christ they are Relates. the [*sic*] relation is that of a Sign, & the thing Signified, for the Type is a Sign: & Christ or Something of Christ in the thing Typified, or Signified: If the Relation be removed then it comes to this that the nature of a Sign Ceases: and the type is no more than another thing. But now seeing the matter is thus Christ doth transcendently excel the Type. For the Excellency of the thing Signified doth thus excel the Sign. The Sign of the Sun is not comparable to the Sun itselfe. The Garland & Tuns that signifie Wine to be Sold not to the wine. (Taylor 1990, 9)

In other words, in Taylor’s religious world, “types are drafts, lineaments, sketches, drawings, and ‘Shadows of Christ’” (Munk 91). As Taylor explains to his parishioners: “Some take the Word Shadow, to be an allusion to the first drawght of a Picture which is pensild out with a Coale, or black Lead, & as such is called the Shadow: but after its completed with fair Colours” (Taylor 1990, 5). Adam, “drawn out to the very Image of God . . . was the Completest Portraiture, & Resemblance of Christ that ever the Finger of God did pencil out” (Taylor 1990, 44). Noah too is a type of Christ, who “as to Name & reason of its application stands as it were in Print upon Noah as to his Name” (Taylor 1990, 46). By the same token, Joseph “bears a draught of Christ Pensild out upon him” (Taylor 1990, 115) whereas Jesus Christ Himself is “emblemized or typified by Moses. Hence Moses is drawn out by Gods own Finger, as a Sampar wherein Christ is drawn in bright Colours” (Taylor 1990, 135).

Following the well-established typological exegesis, “Puritanism seems to have been doomed to ‘negative theology,’ as Carol Bensick dubs in “Preaching to the Choir: Some Achievements and Shortcomings of Taylor’s *God’s Determinations*” (Bensick 140). If one reads Taylor’s Preface to *God’s Determinations* carefully, he or she will find that question marks abound between the lines of the entire text. The eighteen question marks within forty-four lines seem to reveal Taylor’s repetition compulsion,<sup>3</sup> which to some extent sheds light on the Puritan obsession with God’s perfection and man’s depravity (Bensick 142; Brumm 1972, 205). In stark contrast to *God’s Determinations*, Taylor wrote his *Preparatory Meditations* out of the motive of personal hope, joy, and despair. These poems, written for Taylor’s own individual pleasure and never a part of actual religious service at church gatherings, followed upon his preparation for a sermon to be delivered at monthly communion. They gave the poet an occasion to summarize the emotional and intellectual content of his sermon and to speak directly and fervently to God the Almighty in private (Baym 174). The aftermath of the Tayloristic personal lyric release within panoramic religious confessions is what Jeffrey Hammond calls an articulation of “extrapersonal religious tradition with an intensely personal faith” (367). As a consequence, the eschatological gloom and/or Calvinist grim as revealed in Edward Taylor’s *God’s Determinations* turns out to be somewhat saturated with delightful faith as well as Metaphysical wit in the literary creation of his *Preparatory Meditations*.

In terms of actual primitive life led and experienced by the early colonizers from Europe and Great Britain, the writing of poetry does bear great significances as it provides them with timely relief from endless daily struggles of survival. Even though there was much about congregational

Calvinism that should have denied to the Puritan writer the services of wit, the theology and the new life in the colonies demanded it. As both a pastor and a poet, Edward Taylor needs a particular mode of expression for his spiritual delights. Of these delights Perry Miller writes: "Living was a serious business, and those who took it gaily here would come to reckoning hereafter. What is supportable to them was not the incidental amusements along the way but the one *engrossing joy of the saints' communion with the God* who had made them and had redeemed them" (qtd. in Keller 165, my italics). Under this special circumstance, the need in metaphysical wit served a different purpose in New England during early colonial period. In the Calvinist's view of the mundane world as a hard and dark condition for human creatures on earth, there were few pleasures for the human subjects to resort to in the postlapsarian world of suffering. A humble wit was, however, one safe pleasure, not one of much significance to be sure. Nonetheless, it serves as one safe human pleasure which could help a writer keep his chin up, express his delight, and catch his fleeting negligible ecstasies in the barren wilderness surrounding colonial North America.

In the consciousness of Edward Taylor's, or any other Puritan poet's, afflictions, the fleeting pleasure of Metaphysical wit helped him bear his cross with less pain or drabness. This special human condition during early colonial period in North America applies as well to the poetic undertaking of Anne Bradstreet, another important American writer of the early colonial period. For the female poet, life itself provided human beings with "toys." That is, for someone fascinated with literature and the uses of language, metaphysical wit might be considered to be one of life's more serviceable toys in the wilderness that surrounds the early colonies in North America. Once one took time to play with it and he or she is sure to be cheered a little in the darkness or barrenness of civilization of the time. Once Edward Taylor attempted to use it in his daily life, he could then feel his delight in the obstinate truths about his hard earthly lot and his risky otherworldly possibilities. Hence, the pastor and poet made game of it consistently, as he did in his *Preparatory Meditations*, which allows him to dive imaginatively into divine bliss, with which his faith raises him out of the confines of the terrestrial world peopled with human creatures. Judging from this historical background, what Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations* is about becomes rather apparent. It reveals the religious fact that "delight is the form that man's salvation takes—and in a language appropriate to that delight" (Keller 178).

Therefore, traditional types for Edward Taylor become also poetic shadows or images of personal spiritual realities and intimate fears, desires, or consecrations. In his poetic meditations he seeks not only assurances of personal sanctification, but he also aims to fulfill a self-imposed covenant responsibility to examine his conscience and to sing God's praises. To the vitality of typology as a theological concept which was centuries old and crucial to New England Puritanism, Edward Taylor thus adds the intensity of personal belief and the dynamism of artistic inspiration in the undertaking of his poetic attempts.

It is this combination of typology as well as the dynamism of artistic inspiration that makes Edward Taylor's language full of explosive ejaculations, hyperbolic dramatizations, verbal puns and extravagant conceits. Taylor's verbal performance thence participates in his holy delight, proceeding quite naturally from it and helping greatly to sustain it throughout the stanzas. To see Taylor's "wilderness baroque" within such an esthetic is to place his wit back into the context of his theology where it belongs. Additionally, to see it as part of his theology is to give it an unusual significance for so quaint and contrived a convention of rhetoric. To be sure, it appears to have cheered him a little in his alienation from the divine, as it did other Puritans. It gave him a way of asserting himself within the rigid system of his poetry and it served to stir his religious affections. But Taylor's practice of wit goes well beyond the other New England poets', as so many features of his poetry do. They provide him with a way of exercising his faith, a way of sustaining his hope, and a way of loving his God. His language of delight ("the enjoying faculty")—however worthless and corny it may often appear to be—gave him, though earthbound, an illusion of oneness with his



God. More than anything else, it turned his *Preparatory Meditations* into the richest form of praise for his God that he could ever conceive.

In the final analysis, Edward Taylor belongs not just among the Samuel Mathers and Thomas Taylors, who explicate and preach the religious types from the *Old Testament*, but also among the poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The combination of rationality and heightened affections, so characteristic of Taylor's poetic attempts, brings homiletic doctrine from *Upon the Types of the Old Testament* into his religious meditations. This may have its roots in far deeper schizophrenia in Taylor's own religious heritage, one that does not point toward a psychological dividedness, but rather to a potent integration of two human dimensions. In Taylor, one discovers the ascetic, preacher, and physical man concerned with his outward sinfulness and barrenness in the primitive nature. However, he also appears as the spiritual saint transported into the realms of vision. He is both a rationalist who seeks new understandings and a sensualist who wants to feel his faith through his affections. That is, the pastor and poet would rather sense and know divine grace as the same time by means of his meditative poetic ventures. As such, Taylor views his religion in dichotomous terms, namely as a framework that disciplines the unruly and corrupt impulses of mankind and as a source of inspiration that promises mankind ineffable joys. In consequence, his Puritanism embodies both suffering and salvation, which excruciates, so to speak, self-degradations and grace-inspired ecstasies. Every man in some sense reflects Jesus Christ as the suffering martyr and as the resurrected Son. In a very similar timbre, Edward Taylor feels God's divine wrath and his forgiving love. As a public preacher and private petitioner, Taylor reconciles the outer and inner beings into one prototypal Puritan, one who hopes to take his place in Heaven, not among eminent theologians or typologists but among the poets, where he will "sing / New Psalms on Davids Harpe" (Taylor 1960, 2.2). Accordingly, his gift for lyric meditation makes Edward Taylor "both saint and singer" (Rowe 276) in the long run of a distinctive poetics of Puritanism that the pastor-poet took a lifetime to forge and form.

In a nutshell, conventional language is to Edward Taylor obviously a human, therefore fallen, contrivance of expression. He complains about such a fact throughout his *Meditations*. Only in leaps of logic and leaps of metaphor—to human senses, of course, absurd and silly—could truth appear to be revealed. God's sense is nonsense to man and in nonsense God's truth makes its revealing appearance. Language is earthbound, inexpressive, dead, but the articulate fool-in-Christ, namely the poet and the conceitist, has greater opportunity to make that connection with the divine, which in the long run results in spiritual delight for the craftsman of words. Hence, as Hephaestus forges a brave shield for Achilles under the supplication of Thetis, so does Edward Taylor as a pastor and poet forge a new poetics of Puritanism out of the calling of Zion. In *Preparatory Meditations*, the pastor and poet manipulates traditional typological language with a variety of literary devices, which include the maneuvering of questioning, oxymoron, colloquy, inversion, strenuous metaphor, excessive repetition, truncated syntax, catalogue of diseases, and so forth. The intentional manipulation is meant by Edward Taylor to upgrade the fallen, corrupted human language to the bar of that of God and thus create a sort of Zion language in the mundane world of human creatures. Nevertheless, as a logician and pious suppliant at the same time, Taylor sometimes suffers from schizophrenia and moral masochism, which for Freud might happen when the subject, as a result of an unconscious sense of guilt, seeks out the position of victim without any pleasure being directly involved (Laplanche 244). Obviously, the "unconscious sense of guilt" for Taylor, a Puritan pastor, is the inescapable Original Sin. The "predestined" (Miller 17) guilt makes Taylor a born patient who is undergoing the process of so-called talking cure in the light of psychoanalysis, while writing his *Preparatory Meditations* in private as a means of seeking both spiritual relief and pleasure brought about by the verbal liberty of metaphysical wit. On the other hand, the meditations not only embody Taylor's verbal piety, but they contribute to maintaining the Tayloristic unity of matter and spirit. For Edward Taylor, illness is spiritual in origin, and a true



cure resides in a purging or clearing of the channels of divine grace between God and nature. It is through Jesus Christ that grace flows, for He is the ultimate Physician to the human patients (Rainwater 27). Eventually, the more verbally repetitive Taylor is, the more psychologically healthy he will be in his world of poesy.

In conclusion, Edward Taylor's new poetics of Puritanism fuses both Biblical typology and lyrical poetry. It transforms hermeneutic into aesthetic in a way that suggests marked continuities with Transcendentalism. Drawing upon this new poetics of Puritanism, the pastor-poet is not a religious ascetic any more but he becomes a spiritual singer. He not only pursues religious saint-hood, but he also buries himself in being a secular as well as personal lyricist. Despite that Taylor's monotonous theme of religion and salvation tends to render his *Preparatory Meditations* into a rigid formulation of religious thought, the free association and lingual freedom embodied in his poetic undertaking, however, celebrates a highly intimate and personalized relation to God the Almighty. To some literary critics, this personalized poetics of Edward Taylor's, albeit Puritan in nature, bears on some sort of lyricism, foreshadows the eventful and eventual emergence of Emersonian individualism as well as later American democracy together with its accompanying capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Taylor did not want his poetry to be published, not even after his death. This is not only because the imagery would have struck his sober New England contemporaries as dangerously sensual and thus popish, or because Taylor's own ideas were similar to the liberal Cambridge Platonism of which the New Englanders were so suspicious. For Ursula Brumm, it seems to be mainly "because his poetry ultimately led him to a sort of allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, which Puritanism rejected as Catholic and medieval" (Brumm 1970, 57).
- <sup>2</sup> It is important to understand that Puritans seldom used the word *heart* to denote something physical or "visible." It might be defined variously as either the conscious soul or the unconscious will. To understand this, one needs to be aware of the fact that "the question of free will was a *question of freedom* but not of will, as it might be in more recent times" (Johnson 18, emphases mine).
- <sup>3</sup> At the level of concrete psychopathology, Repetition Compulsion (the compulsion to repeat) is an ungovernable process originating in the unconscious. As a result of its action, the subject deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old experience, but he does not recall this prototype; on the contrary, he has the strong impression that the situation is fully determined by the circumstances of the moment (Laplanche 78).
- <sup>4</sup> For further and detailed discussions on Puritanism's influences upon Transcendentalism, individualism, capitalism, and American democracy, see Bercovitch 6; Keller 1972, 175, 183; Johnson 4–5; Beard 2; Russell 123.

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# The Limit of Realism and the Scope of Sympathy: Visuality and Embodiment in “The Lifted Veil”

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YIMING SHAO

**Abstract:** Embedding George Eliot’s story “The Lifted Veil” in the broader transition of visual models in the 19th century from detached reason to embodied perception, this essay argues that Latimer’s detachment from embodied perception aligns with the camera obscura model of visuality, which leads to a loss of the corporeal foundation for sympathy – the ability of stepping out from his self-absorption to accept the participation of others. With a close examination of the so far ignored scene where Latimer encounters Lorenzo Lotto’s Portrait of Lucrezia, this essay discusses the affinity Eliot draws between Latimer’s mindset and the visual mechanics closely related to the ontological valence of paintings, which points to the adaptation of the notion of realistic representation in art history. By juxtaposing Eliot’s literary experiment with artistic ones, this essay undertakes to reconsider Eliot’s reflection on the scope of sympathy in light of her revision of literary realism.

**Keywords:** George Eliot, “The Lifted Veil”, visuality, sympathy, realism

In the motto of chapter 21 of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), George Eliot describes how an exclusive vision may give rise to the destruction of a soul:

And looking at life parcel-wise, in the growth of a single lot, who having a practised vision may not see that ignorance of the true bond between events, and false conceit of means whereby sequences may be compelled — like that falsity of eyesight which overlooks the gradations of distance, seeing that which is afar off as if it were within a step or a grasp — precipitates the mistaken soul on destruction?  
(190)

This passage touches upon several key notions that Eliot values much in her career: by looking “parcel-wise”<sup>1</sup>, one relinquishes the connection with others, hence the renunciation of the foundation of sympathy; the loss of “the gradations of distance” implies a disembodied and metaphysical evasiveness from practical life; and the underlying visual metaphors indicate the affinity between visuality, reality, and sympathy. Curiously, all these constituents have been anticipated seventeen years earlier in Eliot’s most extraordinary fiction, “The Lifted Veil” (1859). It is one of the few stories Eliot has ever written, and the only first-person narration except for the experimental essay-novel *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879). Early scholarships on this story mainly focus on two perspectives: how it reflects Eliot’s engagement with pseudoscience such as Spiritualism, mesmerisation, and phrenology, and how the story contributes to the application of Eliot’s aesthetics to her fiction writings; more recent studies comment on the ethical defects of Latimer and their relation with contemporary pathology.<sup>2</sup> Despite the attempts to account for the frequent visual allusions in the story, few critics have noticed the pivotal scene in which Latimer encounters Lorenzo Lotto’s painting of Lucrezia and how the story is embedded in the transition of models of visuality which influences Eliot’s understanding of sympathy as well as her improvement of realism. In this essay, I argue that by relinquishing embodied perceptions, Latimer relapses into the visuality modelled on

camera obscura and thus loses the foundation of sympathy – the ability of stepping out from his self-absorption to accept the participation of others.

Wandering in the Lichtenberg Palace, Latimer declares himself the captive of a portrait of Lucrezia Borgia, fascinated by the “terrible reality of that cunning, relentless face” while at the same time feeling “a strange poisoned sensation” as if he has been “inhaling a fatal odour” (“Veil” 19). Considering the painting’s clear allusion to the Roman heroine Lucretia who suffers the rape of Sextus Tarquinius and kills herself, critics usually deem the indication of Latimer’s fascination obvious enough and leave few comments: it is an ominous foretelling of Latimer’s obsession with the “Water-Nixie” (“Veil” 11), Bertha Grant, and of their uncanny marriage that will ultimately end up with the bizarre revelation of a murderous attempt from Bertha. But the ominous indication apart, the question why Latimer is at the same time fascinated and revulsed by the painting even before he sees the prevision of his unsuccessful marriage remains a question. With a poet *manqué*’s aesthetic eyes, what does he see in the picture that affects him so much? Or is Latimer’s reaction simply another signature of his creator’s “deep misgiving” (Knoepfelmacher 139), displaying what Terry Eagleton proclaims as “the epistemological imperialism” of realism (54)? Only with a closer examination of the painting itself can Latimer’s struggle with the solipsistic immergence in himself be understood. The picture, long misattributed to Giorgione, is in effect a portrait by Lorenzo Lotto (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** *Lorenzo Lotto, Portrait of a Woman inspired by Lucretia*

The young lady rendered to be Lucrezia wears a gold wedding band, holding in one hand a drawing in which Lucretia is about to stab herself with a dagger, and pointing to a note writing “NEC VILA IMPVDICA IVCRETIA EXEMPLO VIVET” with her other hand. The note is supposed to be the last words of Lucretia, meaning roughly “Nor shall any immoral one lives as an example”, implying that by committing suicide Lucretia deprives any unchaste women a possible excuse for living (“Description”). In other words, in this painting Lucretia is not lamented but praised for her suicidal preservation of marital chastity, despite the contemptible rape she suffers. Thus, the painting forms a conversational gesture between the Lucretia holding the drawing and the Lucretia holding a dagger,

pointing to what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls the ontological valence of the picture: how a picture transcends the conception of a copy which merely imitates and represents, and achieves a separate existence that in a state of semi-detachment relates to the present. The first and foremost important fact of this conversational gesture between the two ladies is that Lucretia does not treat the drawing simply as mere a copy of Lucretia to contemplate or admire: with her left hand holding the corner of the painting and her right hand pointing to it, she treats Lucretia not as someone suffers in the early sixth century BC but acknowledges her as the blessing and the guardian of her own marriage. On the other side, the Lucretia in the drawing leans forward towards Lucretia, her neck stretching woefully and her face bearing a deplorable expression, longing for understanding and compassion. The angle of the two ladies’ torsos being almost parallel, the outreaching hands of both seeming to be referring to each other, the portrait thus creates a liminal space of “semi-detachment” in which “the crux of an aesthetic experience is imagined, or depicted, or understood as residing neither in complete absorption in an artwork nor in critical detachment from it, but in the odd fact of both states existing simultaneously” (Plotz 1). Built upon David Summer’s notion of “doubling distance” of paintings –

that is, viewers are to encounter paintings both as material objects and as representations of a virtual world (Plotz 9), Plotz emphasizes the interactional gestures between the painting and the viewer, as exemplified in the case of Lucrezia and Lucretia. What makes the double encounter in a semi-detached state possible is Gadamer's idea of ontological valence. According to Gadamer, a painting, and especially a portrait as the intensification of representative paintings, is not simply a copy of the original. A copy, like a mirror image, exists "only for someone looking into the mirror, and is nothing beyond its mere appearance", and fulfills itself only in self-effacement (Gadamer 133-4); but painting transcends copying and achieves "an autonomous reality" (Gadamer 135) that forms the groundwork for interaction. It is essential to note that for Gadamer, autonomy of artworks does not mean the Kantian disinterestedness – on the contrary, it requires "being present", which means "to participate" (Gadamer 121), and the participation rather than something teleologically outside a painting is what constitutes the ontology of artworks:

the being of the work of art is play and that it must be perceived by the spectator in order to be actualized (vollendet), so also it is universally true of texts that only in the process of understanding them is the dead trace of meaning transformed back into living me. (Gadamer 156)

Gadamer's idea helps reveal an implicit significance of the conversational gesture in Lotto's painting apart from Lucrezia's wish for a chaste and happy marriage: the drawing of Lucretia is only actualized and achieves its living meaning when Lucrezia points at it. In other words, only with the presence of an Other person who participates in the actualization of meaning can the ontological existence of a painting be secured. The gesture of Lucrezia fulfils the meaning of the drawing she holds, and the same can be applied to Lotto's portrait of Lucrezia: it also needs an Other presence to be actualized, as is insinuated by the empty chair which is supposed to symbolize the absence of Lucrezia's husband, and taken now by Latimer with his fascinated vision.

When Latimer gazes at the painting, he must have realized how his presence may actualize it, a capability enchants and appals him at the same time. The empty chair invites him to engage with the virtual space the young lady occupies. Her cunning eyes look neither towards the place where her absent husband is supposed to be sitting, nor at Lucretia who bears the deploring face, but directly towards the viewer outside the frame – Lucrezia's is a gaze firmly directed to Latimer's vision, a gaze that projects the realities she sees and meets Latimer's eyes, reflecting his own consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the "terrible reality" ("Veil" 19) Latimer notices in the painting is not the result of representational copying but what Gadamer calls the autonomous reality, involving the participation of Latimer's consciousness. The sensitivity Latimer possesses as a poet manqué makes such engagement so strong that, understandably, pictures affect him so much that usually "one or two exhaust all my capability of contemplation" ("Veil" 18). Yet, because of the previous disconcerting experience, on this specific occasion of viewing Lotto's painting, Latimer is especially alive to his contemplative ability that receives another's vision while reflecting and projecting his own at the same time. Once in a moment of "peculiar bitterness" against his brother, Latimer reveals what his prevision shows him and forestalls some words his brother is going to say to him, "as if it were something we had both learned by rote", thus causing annoyance and disturbance on both sides ("Veil" 18). Despite his admitted magnification of the influence of his deeds, Latimer is deeply troubled by his "diseased participation in other people's consciousness" ("Veil" 17). The "superadded consciousness of the actual" ("Veil" 18) that Gadamer regards as the essential constitution of an artwork's ontological valence is, to Latimer, an ominous demonstration of his wickedly supernatural ability to merge his horizons with the others'. As a result, it would be natural for him to feel "a strange poisoned sensation" ("Veil" 19) when he notices the apparitional shadow on the left margin of Lotto's painting – a half-split figure surrounded by rectangular light. Though technically speaking, it is the shadow of Lucrezia cast by the light from a window put slightly higher on the unseen righthand side of the frame, from Latimer's point of view, the split shadow half within the painting, half stepping outside the frame may as well be the projection of his own body, and more unsettlingly, his own iniquitous consciousness.



But why, one may ask, does Latimer detest such a convenient ability so much? What troubles Latimer most is the unreconcilable dividedness of his “double consciousness [...] flowing on like two parallel streams that never mingle their waters and blend into a common hue” (“Veil” 21) – that is, the split of himself into “a self-centred negative nature” and “a morbidly sensitive nature perpetually craving sympathy and support” (“Veil” 15). In other words, the intrusive visions from other individuals’ minds overwhelm Latimer’s self-consciousness, with the resulting sickly omniscience stemming from a “morbidly” developed mental faculty. His attempts to block out these intrusions appear negatively self-centred, which proves to be equally detrimental. Latimer’s diagnosis of himself as mentally unhealthy may be deduced from contemporary understanding of how mind works. In A. L. Wigan’s *A New View of Insanity* (1844), he argues that “the wayward cerebrum might overpower the higher organ situated the individual at the borders of criminality, immorality, or insanity” (Tressler 485), followed by the elder John Addington Symonds who in his *Sleep and Dreams* (1851) claims that double consciousness is a “fatal and unethical tool” that reduces others’ human complexity to fragmented characters or figments (Tressler 486). The connection between the health of one’s mind/brain and one’s dangerous moral tendency made by Wigan and Symonds is disturbing enough for Latimer to disavow Adam Smith’s moral instruction that pleasurable sympathy can be achieved by opening oneself to the others:

The man who indulges us in this natural passion, who invites us into his heart, who, as it were, sets open the gates of his breast to us, seems to exercise a species of hospitality more delightful than any other. No man, who is in ordinary good temper, can fail of pleasing, if he has the courage to utter his real sentiments as he feels them, and because he feels them. It is this unreserved sincerity which renders even the prattle of a child agreeable. (399)

The “plain, open, and direct” (Smith 47) visions of others’ minds are never pleasing for Latimer, as this “unpleasant sensibility” hinges upon his senses in an annoyingly uncomfortable way, like “an importunate, ill-played musical instrument, or the loud activity of an imprisoned insect”, or like “a fatal odour” (“Veil” 13, 19). The physical disturbances Latimer detests will ultimately result in his relinquishing the active use of his senses and his relapse into a disembodied solipsism.

Moreover, Symonds not only relates double consciousness to cerebral and moral defects but accuses creative artists of “falsely masquerading [objects] for his audience under the guise of an unbiased and truthful objectivity” due to their discontentment with mere imitation (Tressler 486). This justification of imitative arts – or in other words, mere copies – against the engaging arts derived from creator’s double consciousness appeals to Latimer’s fear and detestation of his own mental penetrability, leading to the deliberate maiming of his aesthetic sentiments. Probably horrified by the apparitional shadow in Lotto’s picture, Latimer moves away from the painting, blocking both his sensitiveness to art as well as his connection with the real world: “I followed them dreamily, and was hardly alive to what occurred till they had all gone up to the gallery, leaving me below; for I refused to come within sight of another picture that day.” (“Veil” 19). Despite the attempt for disconnection, Latimer is not fortunate enough to block another ominous clairvoyance that shows how Bertha despises him in their future marital life. It is essential to note that when Latimer views the prevision, his physical senses no longer function – they are displaced by disembodied projections that recall Descartes’s radical division of body and mind. Before he is immersed into the vision, Latimer feels “a strange intoxicating numbness” and “[t]he gardens, the summer sky, the consciousness of Bertha’s arm being within mine, all vanished, and I seemed to be suddenly in darkness” (“Veil” 19); his senses are only to be retrieved when the clairvoyant vision is over: “Then I had a sense of my eyelids quivering, and the living daylight broke in upon me; I saw gardens, and heard voices” (“Veil” 20). Expectedly, what he sees in the trance does not bear any embodied impression: they remain to be “a dark image on the retina” (“Veil” 20). In other words, Latimer is looking without seeing in his trance-like daydream, and the impressions he gets have never penetrated deeper than the surface of his retina to be actively reflected under the scrutiny of his capability of judgement. The split of the



function of a mind's eye and bodily mechanisms is very likely endorsed by a popular doctrine of vitalism which believes that there is a life force independent of bodily organism (Small xxv). George Henry Lewes refutes vitalism as scientifically implausible in his *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859) while George Eliot recognizes its antithesis in contemporary observation of microscopic particles. Botanist Robert Brown has observed "a very unexpected fact of seeming vitality" during his examination of pollens under microscope, thus discrediting the view that particles are inert mechanics (Brilmyer 48–49). An obvious Eliotian allusion to Brown's discovery would be Tertius Lydgate's ambitious research on particles in *Middlemarch*, but in "The Lifted Veil" Eliot has also insinuated the noxious effect of the split spiritual and physical vitality. Earlier in Latimer's narrative, he describes the process of his clairvoyance as being "thrust asunder by a microscopic vision", which leads to venomous demonstrations of "intermediate frivolities", "suppressed egoism", "struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts" ("Veil" 14). According to Brown's observation, the microscopic vision would be concomitant with physical vitality, but in Latimer's case he decides to suppress the particle movements: for him, "human words and deeds" emerge from disembodied thoughts like "leaflets covering a fermenting heap" ("Veil" 14), indicating the disconnection between particles in the air and one's olfactory sensation.<sup>4</sup> Latimer's loathing of physicality is declared more straightforwardly when he is asked to sit as the model for "a fancy picture": "I thoroughly disliked my own *physique*, and nothing but the belief that it was a condition of poetic genius would have reconciled me to it" ("Veil" 14, emphasis original). The relinquishment of physicality here foreshadows Latimer's renunciation of his sensual ability when confronted with Lotto's painting, as he renders it as both painful and morally defective. With these unpleasant thoughts in his mind, it seems only natural that Latimer concords with Symonds's argument that the double consciousness is unhealthy and immoral, but I would argue that these ominous visions do not result from but in Latimer's painful mental state, and that they are the products of the disregard for embodied physicality.

Latimer's neglect of physicality appears in his narrative as part of his aesthetic theory, the defect of which will ultimately give rise to his incapability of sympathy despite his seemingly omniscient visions. When he first sees the prevision of Prague, Latimer reckons it as the dawning divination of the "poet's nature in me", and considers that his physical illness has brought about "some happy change in my organisation – given a firmer tension to my nerves." ("Veil" 10). It is obvious that Latimer treats his physical state as the means to achieve mental elevation. Significantly, he relates this seeing the prevision in his mind's eye to the success of those great spiritualist poets: how the blind Homer and Milton "*saw* the plain of Troy" and "the earthward flight of the Tempter", and how Dante has left his physical body before he "*saw* the abodes of the departed" ("Veil" 10, emphasis mine). Latimer's exultation of sharing the horizons with these spiritual poets deprived of physical eyesight naturally leads to "an exertion of my will", an attempt in vain to guide his "poetic memory" to something "more familiar to my imagination" ("Veil" 10). Latimer's aesthetic understanding has two fatal defects that will eventually cause his death in sorrow and loneliness: first, he fails to recognize physicality as the essential perquisition of imagination and common feelings; second, he misreads "partial knowledge" as "imagination", consequently restricting his taste of artwork within the scope of copying from his own limited, solipsistic mind. These defects are demonstrated by his choice of Cartesian vision when encountering Lotto's painting and during his clairvoyance.

Latimer's contempt for physicality undermines the essential precondition of imagination and its productiveness. According to Edmund Burke, imagination derives from the representatives of the senses. As everyone is endowed with sensory organs, imagination is a common faculty in all humans, and can be enhanced through "a greater degree of natural sensibility" and "a closer and longer attention to the object" (Burke 21). Therefore, Latimer's obsession with pure spirituality not only impedes the possible sympathetic understanding with others through sensory connection but also undermines his power of imagination. More importantly, when dealing with more abstract proper-

ties – that is, what Burke calls compounded abstract words like virtue, honour, persuasion, etc., physical senses must be supplemented by legislative reason, which “affords rational agents the ability to autonomously prescribe laws and maxims to themselves and others” (Marshall 23). In other words, a complete aesthetic process should involve both sensory connection to the physical world and the rational intervention, adjustment, and modification to the sensory impressions with the help of judgment. Latimer, however, can only resort to his “poetic memory”, which is in effect a self-contradictory formulation since he is too unimaginative, if not too frightened, to take in anything that is not copied from his known knowledge. Therefore, there is no wonder that when he tries to exert his poetic power in search of “more vivid images” (vivid in the sense of life-like), he fails to produce anything but the “colouring the Canaletto engravings that hung in my old bedroom at home” (“Veil” 10). Understandably, when Latimer is appalled by the apparitional shadow in Lotto’s painting – that is, the imaginative intrusion of an Other – he resolutely resorts to the imitative branch of art endorsed by Symonds’s moral discourse. Indeed, Latimer is aptly diagnosed as “a poet manqué who possesses ‘the poet’s sensibility without his voice’” (Knoepflmacher 142). Although Donald Stone has detected an affinity between Latimer and Rousseau, claiming that it is their excessive romantic imagination that decides the depriving distance from happiness in life (210), it is my belief that Latimer’s rigid “poetic memory” would take him no further than the reiteration of his own partial, disembodied mind: neither has he turned the romantic impulse into fanciful poems like Coleridge does, nor would he leave sharp observation and expression of aesthetic sentiments like those of Walter Pater, who, unlike Latimer, clings to the “hard gem-like flame” of experience of life, who is desperate to “breathe a common air and catch light and heat from each other’s thoughts”, and who is only too willing to compare Lady Lisa to an unnatural and penetrating figure of vampire “older than the rocks among which she sits [...] and learned the secrets of the grave” (120, 6, 70). Even unlike Stephen Dedalus, the modern poet manqué wandering in Dublin, Latimer is too dejected to learn from a Leopold Bloom how to truly sympathize with others instead of being confined to a self-restricting solipsism. What prevents Latimer from all of these possible outlets is the Cartesian vision he submits to.

The Cartesian vision and along with it, the visual mechanics related to camera obscura accounts for Latimer’s disembodied approach to the world outside himself, which leads to his solipsistic and reductive estimation of others, hence the impotence of his scope of sympathy. Narrowly defined in its mechanical sense, camera obscura is an optical device made from a darkened chamber with an aperture on it. Light from an external source coming through the aperture projects the image of the objects onto the opposite surface. More importantly, however, camera obscura should not be regarded as simply “an inert and neutral piece of equipment or a set of technical premises” – rather, it is embedded in “a much larger and denser organization of knowledge and of the observing subject” (Crary 27). For about two hundred years since the sixteenth century, camera obscura represents a reason-based way through which a subject observes the objective world, ideally unmediated by sensorial deflections. Camera obscura cancels the Renaissance tradition in which nature and its representation stay adjacent to each other – in other words, a tradition that acknowledges the affinity between and the unity of an embodied observer and the outside world s/he perceives. In contrast, the introduction of camera obscura denotes a kind of detachment, defining an observer as “isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines”, thus cutting the connection between the observing subject and the perceived image (Crary 39). Moreover, the observer is “decorporealize[d]” in the sense that the individual’s physical and sensory experience is reinstituted in and replaced by a set of mechanical apparatus: in the description of Issac Newton, there is no embodied observer in the dark chamber but an organizer, a “stager of an apparatus” who arranges the positions of lens and pinhole. (Crary 39–40). A much more unsettling description of the epistemological presumption of camera obscura can be found in Descartes’s *La dioptrique* (1637), in which he proposes to take a dead eye from a newly dead person, or less satisfactorily but quite

feasibly, an eye from an ox, and use it as the pinhole of a camera obscura. Descartes's suggestion indicates the "radical disjunction of eye from observer", which turns a corporeal eye to an "infallible metaphysical eye" (Crary 48). In accordance with Descartes's radical division of body and mind, the model of camera obscura discredits the participation of a corporeal observer, let alone the possible interaction between subject and object. Naturally, the seventeenth century Dutch painters such as Esaias van de Velde and Jan Vermeer endeavoured to faithfully represent "reality" with the help of camera obscura, which allows them to see the image of nature within their studios (Wheelock 101). According to Jonathan Crary, the mechanics of camera obscura dominates the way subjects observe the world as well as the paintings until the 1830s. Typically, Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin's painting *Boy Blowing Bubbles* (1739) demonstrates how the Cartesian understanding of visuality sought to confirm "a single homogeneous field" constructed by disembodied reason (figure 2): there are two parallel straws, one in a glass of feculent soapy water, the other produces a transparent bubble almost exactly the same size as the boy's head; the very transparency of the bubble transcending the solidity of the terrace on which the glass of opaque water is placed indicates "the distorting power of a medium" bound to be neutralized and governed by reason – the boy's head elaborately placed above the bubble (Crary 64). Viewed in this light, the boy blowing the bubble is immersed in a self-absorption, focusing on nothing other than the transparency related to his consciousness. In the same light, Latimer who feels uncomfortable with the questioning gaze of Lorenzia is only too willing to lapse into the disembodiment enveloped by the "pale shadows" of his ideas ("Veil" 21).

When George Eliot composes this story in 1859, she was probably aware of the transition of visuality from the Cartesian detachment emphasizing the hegemony of reason to the modern acknowledgement of corporeality based on the position of a complicatedly involved observing subject. By 1840s, the dominating paradigm of camera obscura was challenged by the invention and introduction of a number of optical devices that shifts from "something external and public [...] to something wholly internal or subjective" (Wolfreys 64): stereoscope, kaleidoscope, phenakistoscope, and so on. Unlike camera obscura which uses an extracted eyeball as the indication of unmediated, detached vision, these devices acknowledge the process of perception itself as the primary object of vision (Crary 138). In other words, the fluid identity of an observer whose physical condition, perception, and imagination are acknowledged is admitted and introduced into the study of visuality. In the previous model of camera obscura, the single-eye point of view urges the viewers to accept the similarity between the projected image and the real object; the new inventions, however,



Figure 2. Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, *Boy Blowing Bubbles*

are actually in accordance with the "*non-veridical* theories of vision that effectively annihilate a real world" (Crary 14, emphasis original): generally, they abandon the single-eye perspective for the biologically credited retinal afterimage and binocular disparity, expecting the "functional interaction of body and machine" (Crary 132). The "dissolving image" ("Veil" 10) Latimer uses to describe the previsions he sees, for instance, functions when two angled magic lanterns alternately project overlapped images onto a screen in a speed too fast for human eyes to detect. Some more complicated but entertaining displays of these devices require not only the participation of the viewers but also present them a test for both imagination and judgment. In 1856 and 1857, the popular public scientific lecturer John Pepper held two speeches on optical illusion, to be fol-

lowed by his famous 1862 lecture at the Polytechnic in which he presented stunning ghost illusions; Pepper's conjuring was so popular that he gave a lecture to the Prince of Wales and Prince and Princess Louis of Hesse by royal command (Lightman 202-4). As Terry Castle has pointed out, the visualized ghosts caused a profound epistemological confusion: in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, ghosts have been understood as either the manipulation of a transcendent being like God, or originated in the troubled brain of the ghost-seer, but Pepper have produced these illusionary ghosts with the help of devices that rely on the new model of visibility and projected them outward (54, 58). In other words, what was previously understood as a process within the minds has been externalized in "an uncanny, involuntary, oddly embodied way" (Castle 59). It is no longer feasible to get rid of the horror one sees by resorting to a higher providence or to one's own wicked mentality; to some extent, viewing a visualized ghost is comparable to viewing a painting, as sensory involvement, imagination, and judgment are all essential to account for the interwoven reality and consciousness.

By introducing the new optical devices and Eliot's knowledge of them, I am by no means implying that the previsions Latimer sees is produced by mechanics; rather, I want to call attention to the important episteme they represent: visibility should no longer be understood as the static, unilateral, and incorporeal gaze modelled as camera obscura, but requires an embodied participation of something other than the self-absorbed observer. The modern visibility turns to the everyday experience of seeing, remembering, and imagining, and thus endeavours to avoid the potential danger of reflection: "a danger in paying too much attention to mental images or in 'thinking too hard'" (Castle 57-8). As the model of camera obscura can be illustrated by Chardin's *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, the modern visibility can also be demonstrated by Édouard Manet's painting of the same name (1867).<sup>5</sup> (figure 3)



Figure 3. Édouard Manet. *Boy Blowing Bubbles*

In Manet's *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, there is no parallel straws: the only one is held in the boy's hand which produces a smaller and more opaque bubble. The boy takes the bowl containing soppy water in the other hand, thus shattering the split of body and mind, of materiality and spirituality represented in Chardin's painting. In a gesture not unlike the Lucretia holding the dagger, the boy raises the straw much higher than his predecessor, making the bubble stay at almost the same horizontal level of his head, which not only acknowledges the equally important status of one's mind and the opaque mediation represented by the bubble, but also indicates an extended space outside the frame. In a word, the casual, everyday modern gesture in Manet's painting replaces the enclosed, elaborate and contemplative manner of Chardin's. It is precisely at this point that Latimer fails: the evasiveness he shows when confronting Lotto's painting epitomizes his absorption in his own feeble and futile self-consciousness, which leads to the very limited scope of sympathy in spite of his ostensibly omniscient clairvoyance.

The problem of Latimer's lack of engagement in real life and his narcissistic<sup>6</sup> obsession with his own self-consciousness is that he can only understand others reductively and metaphorically rather than sympathetically. In the model of camera obscura, Latimer's monadic point of view is authenticated, but according to the critique of Theodor Adorno, if the "phenomenal self is reduced to simply one empirical object among others, the autonomy and authenticity of its representations are also in question" (Crary 77). In other words, the authenticity of an autonomous modern self cannot be guaranteed simply by one's own metaphysical contemplation on the universality of human reason; only when the modern self is situated among others who are different from itself, can the authenticity of it be possibly realized. The failure to recognize the complicity of others surrounding the embodied self would lead to morbidly egoistic and reductive views: after Latimer has seen prevision of his cruel future marriage, he dwells on it in a most self-pitying way:

My consciousness was heightened to that pitch of intensity in which our own emotions take the form of a drama which urges itself imperatively on our contemplation, and we begin to weep, less under the sense of our suffering than at the thought of it. ("Veil" 24)

Just like the audience who were frightened by Pepper's visualized ghosts, Latimer refuses to recognize the complicated process that involves sensory perception, imagination, and judgment, and stubbornly believes whatever his mind's eye sees. Moreover, the uses of first-person plural pronouns here signify his hasty assertion that what he thinks he sees is a "drama" that is naturally shared by all human beings. It has never occurred to him that Bertha may think differently, less disapprovingly of him. Previously when he discovers that he has wronged Bertha for not taking his present seriously and that Bertha may have a feeling for him, Latimer simply shuts himself up in his room and "intoxicate myself afresh with the thought of this scene, and all it implied" ("Veil" 17), showing no intention of participating in real life and engaging with real people. Latimer's obsession with the drama played within his own mind naturally ensures that the seemingly omniscient clairvoyance should be heavily tampered with by his self-consciousness, if not completely projected by his ego. Understandably, Latimer understands sympathy as a reductively modified "common nature and a common destiny" ("Veil" 31), namely, the nature and destiny of himself. Thomas Albrecht has brilliantly formulated that "the more disturbing ethical conflict in *The Lifted Veil* is not between antipathy and sympathy but between an ethics based on similarity and one based on difference" (Albrecht 443), emphasizing that Eliot's ethical stance cannot not be simply summarized as sympathy based on simulation – more importantly, one must realize the difference between individuals, reaching out to others while allowing others to penetrate one's own self-confinement.<sup>7</sup> Latimer's disappointment culminates after his last attempt to bridge his mind and Bertha's:

I saw *myself* in Bertha's thought as she lifted her cutting grey eyes, and looked at me: a miserable *ghost-seer*, surrounded by phantoms in the noon-day [...] We were front to front with each other, and judged each other. The terrible moment of complete illumination had come to me, and I saw that the darkness had hidden no landscape from me, but only a *blank prosaic wall*. ("Veil" 32, emphasis mine)



Instead of a mind of Bertha's own, Latimer reduces it to a mirror reflecting his own image as a ghost-seer, still troubled by the self-absorptive visuality of camera obscura, with Bertha's thoughts totally impenetrable like a prosaic wall. Albrecht sharply suggests that by treating Bertha's mind as a "prosaic" metaphor, Latimer simply "looks" without "seeing" or "reading" – he fails to interpret the text provided by Bertha, simply replacing it with a visual image that refers back to himself (447). Again it is helpful to draw on Gadamer's explanation of a painting's ontological presence: a painting is situated between a sign and a symbol, the former, like a transparent mirror, disappears when pointing to something else, while the latter represents by taking the place of the original (Gadamer 145–48). Latimer has sadly touched both ends but failed to remain balance: disowning his sensual perceptiveness, he believes in the superiority of unmediated contemplation, and modifies what he encounters in real life with the reduced version of his own. Latimer's tragedy is foretold not by this previsions or clairvoyance, but by his disengagement with facing Lotto's painting.

Critics have long discussed the last scene of blood-transaction as Eliot's allegory of realist narration. James Decker has discovered the etymological meaning of the name "Latimer": literally meaning a man speaking Latin, the word refers to an interpreter, and its relation to the word "Latoner" (laton/latten) may suggest the "mock-saintliness" of "a type of quasi-alchemy, a reinterpretation of the 'facts'" (58–60), which echoes Terry Eagleton's assertion that the parody of omniscience in the story indicates "the sickening tautology of a cultic intersubjectivity" (54), pointing to the defect of realism that Eliot fails to amend: the questionable role of the so-called realist narrator. I would agree with Jill Galvan that Latimer's problematic narration "Eliot's vigilance toward the mediating position" (246), which echoes her metaphors of intricate "drop of ink" and scratched pier-glass, both questioning the reliability of narrative mediation (*AB* 1, *Middlemarch* 166). More important, I will argue that Eliot not only implies the limit of realism but also puts emphasis on how participation fulfils one's ontological existence. Just as Latimer's refusal to recognize the gaze of an other when facing Lotto's painting and his failure to join Bertha in real life, the meaning of a narrative "must be paid for with our life-blood, and printed in the subtle fibres of our nerves." ("Veil" 34). If not complemented by action and participation, the narrative would be mere "neat syntax" and "summary medium" leant by rote, and nothing more ("Veil" 34). Even in the most disturbing blood-transaction scene, Latimer is not unsettled by the bizarre resurrection of Mrs Archer and her accusation against Bertha, and insists to understand it through his own lens: "As for me, this scene seemed of one texture with the rest of my existence" ("Veil" 42). In H. É. Blanchon's picture of this scene *La Transfusion du sang* (1879), Latimer stands at the far-right corner, wearing a coat so shadowy that it is almost indistinguishable from the background (the painting is now lost, and Eliot knows about it but never sees it in person), which aptly illustrates how feebly Latimer participates in any embodied, worldly affairs. When the dying Latimer recounts his life-story, he finally realizes "the powerlessness of ideas" which are "pale shadows that beckoned in vain", but he still fails to extend the scope of sympathy beyond himself: "Are you unable to give me your sympathy – you who read this?" ("Veil" 21).

In "The Lifted Veil", Eliot has touched upon many issues that will be further considered and represented in her career – the problematic mediation of realism, the limited scope of sympathy, and the ontological valence of participation. In the novel immediately follows the story, *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie endeavours to move beyond Latimer's self-absorption to a self-distancing semi-detachment; Silas Marner would awake from his trance-like passivity and welcome the baby that changes his life; Felix Holt and Esther ultimately share a vision that brings about momentous participation in political life; and Dorothea Brooke manages to incorporate Ladislav's artistic vision into sympathetic engagement in real life. Visuality is among the constitutive perspectives through which Eliot discusses the issues of sympathy and realism, and its relevance in the more complicated world of the substantial novels remains to be explored.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “by ‘parcels’ or portions, bit by bit, piecemeal” (*OED*). *OED* uses this particular sentence as the example of this sense.
- <sup>2</sup> For the information on pseudoscience, see Gray and Wood; for Eliot’s early aesthetics, see Viera; for Victorian Spiritualism and its implication on the Women Question, see Flint and Despotopoulou.
- <sup>3</sup> A typical example of such gazes that receive and reflect the viewers’ vision would be that of the queen’s chamberlain in the background of Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656). It is also noticeable that the chamberlain appears only dimly in a half-open door in the shadow, recalling the apparitional shadow in Lotto’s painting.
- <sup>4</sup> Derek Woods in his study convincingly situates this metaphor in the body-mind-environment interaction. Noting the Great Stink in London, 1958, Woods argues that the disgusting smell intrudes “the atoms of mind”, contaminating the moral function in Latimer and his telepathy with other minds (Woods 61–62).
- <sup>5</sup> As Hugh Witemeyer has noticed, there is no direct record of George Eliot’s opinions on modern paintings and impressionist movement in France. However, considering the notorious popularity of the Salon des Refusés in Paris, it would be unlikely that Eliot has never noticed their momentous influence during her visits to many of the important “galleries of Europe” between 1854–1867 (Witemeyer 13). Moreover, as she admires John Ruskin’s art criticism, the fact that she leaves no comment on the famous Whistler vs. Ruskin case (1877) seems more curious. One may even speculate that her long reticence on modern paintings may signify some tacit resonance that she is unwilling to declare. However, it is less important whether Eliot has or has not acknowledged the influence of modern arts than the point that her writings are profoundly embedded within the larger epistemological and scientific model of modern visuality.
- <sup>6</sup> In Nancy Anne Marck’s analysis of *Adam Bede*, she contends that the characterization of Hetty constructs narcissism as a form of egoism which leads to her isolation as well as the moral recovery of the community of Hayslope (Marck 448). It is possible that Eliot brings this narcissistic figure into “The Lifted Veil” which was composed not long after *Adam Bede*, but as I will argue, the narrative intervention in the story serves quite different purposes from those of *Adam Bede*: it does not represent a story of moral correction but shows the very limit of such a narrative.
- <sup>7</sup> For David Hume’s theory that sympathy is based on the similarity of humankind and its influence on Eliot, see Lowe 10–11. In Daniel S. Malachuk’s recent study, he argues that Eliot manages to rival the unlimited scope of sympathy by introducing a reasonably good kind of egoism called by “pride” (Malachuk 33).

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# Impersonal Subjectivity and Aesthetic Self in Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche

VIROSH SINGH BAGHEL & ANUPAM YADAV

**Abstract:** This paper engages Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche in terms of their views on the classical Sanskrit *nāṭya* and classical Greek tragedy. Although disparate in their aesthetics and philosophical frameworks, the two thinkers converge in characterising the aesthetic experience of *nāṭya* and tragedy as a universalised consciousness. For Abhinavagupta, it is an aesthetic pleasure in a repose (*viśrānti*) in one's own consciousness, which is bliss, while for Nietzsche, it is a metaphysical solace in oneness with *one* living reality. Analysing the aesthetic theories of the two thinkers *vis-a-vis* their metaphysical positions, we have conceptualised the idea of the aesthetic self as the *experiencer* of the transformative experiences of the two dramatic arts in the impersonal modes of subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Abhinavagupta, Nietzsche, *Nāṭya*, Greek tragedy, impersonal subjectivity, aesthetic self

## Introduction

Abhinavagupta (c. 950–1020), an Indian aesthetician and philosopher belonging to the philosophical tradition of Kashmir Śaivism, has developed a full-fledged *Rasa-dhvani* theory in the light of Bharatamuni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (hereafter *NS*), the first Indian treatise on dramaturgy, and Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* (hereafter *Dh.*), on which he has written commentaries *Abhinavabhāratī* (hereafter *Abh.*) and *Locana*, respectively. Abhinavagupta's critical appreciation of Bharata's *Rasasūtra*—“*vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisaṃyogād rasanīṣpattiḥ*” that “*Rasa* is produced (*niṣpattiḥ*) from a combination (*saṃyoga*) of Determinants (*vibhāva*), Consequents (*anubhāva*), and Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhicāribhāva*)” (Bharata, *NS* 302), in the light of his predecessors' interpretations, especially Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, leads to his celebrated claim that *Rasāsvāda* is *Brahmāsvāda* (Abhinavagupta, *Locana* 2.4 L). This parallel between aesthetic experience and spiritual experience is rooted in his Śaiva metaphysics of the non-duality of the individual and the Universal Śiva consciousness. Śiva, an all-inclusive supreme, indescribable consciousness (*anuttara*), is not only a manifestation of His freedom (*svātantrya*) in all multiplicities (*prakāśa*) but also *vimarśa*, a reflective awareness of His own being. For Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic rapture is *ānanda*, which is understood to be the level of Śakti or *vimarśa*, where the spectator, as a Universalised Subject, enjoys the generalised emotions (present as latent impressions, or *vāsanās*, in each self) awakened by the dramatic situation in one's consciousness, and experiences a self-cogitation when they subdue in the subconscious. *Nāṭya* performs a crucial function of generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), enabling the *sahṛdaya* to experience a transcendental awareness, a state of pure consciousness, a repose (*viśrānti*) in one's own Self. Ultimately, the aesthetic experience transcends the aesthete from the personal subjectivity to a transcendental experience of tasting the Self. This radical shifting gives birth to an aesthetically mediated self,

the subject of this experience. The subjectivity of this transcendental experience has to be from an impersonal mode, and Abhinavagupta's idea of the Universalised Subject, in his five-level analysis of aesthetic experience, provides this impersonal medium.

Nietzsche (1844–1900), is not primarily interested in developing a theory of aesthetics and approaches art from the “prism of life” (Nietzsche, *ASC* 5). His view about the science of aesthetics is that it is a natural evolution of the operation of two energising forces shaping Western artistic traditions: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. These two forces, named after the Greek deities Apollo and Dionysus, represent distinct artistic impulses: the former associated with order, individuation, and the visual realm, and the latter with excess, self-forgetfulness, and music. The tension and synthesis of these two art impulses, as Nietzsche sees it, constitute the essence of Greek tragedy. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) (hereafter *BT*), Nietzsche interprets the Greek *Attic* tragedy as a metaphysical experience of the primal truth that our separate individualities are illusory and explains why tragedy elicits pleasure. What makes the tragedy pleasurable is the Dionysiac effect, that is, a merger with the primordial unity (*Ur-Eine*). This aesthetic phenomenon of primordial unity is intertwined with the metaphysical conception of the Will, which Nietzsche takes from Arthur Schopenhauer, who conceived of the whole world as a representation of the Will—a cosmic, irrational force that manifests itself in ceaseless creation and destruction without any motive. As *willing* is deprivation, it is essentially suffering. Nietzsche's celebrated view that life and the world can be aesthetically justified presents this world-Will as an amoral artist god who redeems his suffering by creating humans. He interprets the Apollonian and Dionysian arts in the light of this quasi-metaphysical picture of the world-artist. Thus, the Apollonian is the artistic spirit in which we take redemption in creating our individualities as beautiful semblances, and the Dionysian represents that we are the ‘works of art’ to be destroyed in the hands of the world-artist. The two art energies in the tragic drama present the tragic myth of the hero experiencing the illusoriness of our separate individualities and an aesthetic delight in the indestructibility of life through a momentary union with what Nietzsche calls ‘one living being’ (*BT* § 7, 17). Tragedy, thus, characterises aesthetic delight in immersiveness in universal reality. Taking insights from Abhinavagupta, we have argued that, like *nāṭya*, tragedy also generalises the aesthetic situation, which we have analysed in the phenomenon of the Dionysian, and, further, we have articulated the subjectivity of ‘tragic pleasure’ in the impersonal Dionysiac consciousness. In what follows, we analyse (i) the nature of aesthetic experience in *nāṭya* and tragedy *vis-a-vis* the metaphysical positions of the two thinkers with a focus on how the two dramatic arts generalise the aesthetic situations and provide an impersonal mode of consciousness and (ii) to theorise a plausible account of the aesthetic self in the articulation of impersonal subjectivity.

### Aesthetic Experience in *Nāṭya*

Abhinavagupta elaborates his theory of *rasa* based on Bharata's *Rasasūtra* alongside its interpretations offered by various other scholars. For both Bharata and Abhinavagupta, *rasa* constitutes the fundamental element of drama. Bharata has articulated, “*na hi rasādṛte kaścīdarthaḥ pravartate*” — “without *Rasa*, no meaning can be conveyed” (Abhinavagupta, *Abh. Vol. I* 290). Abhinavagupta also claims that “*nāṭya eva cha rasāḥ*” — “drama is *rasa*” (*Abh. Vol. I* 303), underscoring that *rasa* embodies the essence of dramatic performance. Regarding this paramount importance of *rasa* in the dramaturgical process in Abhinavagupta's thoughts, G. T. Deshpande (1989) writes,

...a dramatist cannot proceed with effective situations in drama unless he fixes his mind on the *Rasa* that he wants to present; the actor cannot make a choice of costumes and makeup unless he knows what *Rasa* he has to portray through acting; and the spectator goes to the theatre only to relish *Rasa* in the drama... Thus, *Rasa* is important from whatever angle we look at the drama. (66)<sup>1</sup>

Bharata has defined *rasa* as “produced (*niṣpattiḥ*) from a combination (*saṃyoga*) of Determinants (*vibhāva*), Consequents (*anubhāva*), and Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhicāribhāva*)” (NS 302). Abhinavagupta expands on this by asserting that *rasa* is an organic unity and emerges from a structured integration of *vibhāvas*, *anubhāvas*, and *vyabhicāribhāvas*. He clarifies that *rasa* is not an objective entity (*siddha*) that can serve as a knowable object. The *vibhāvas*, etc., do not signify ordinary things but rather contribute to the realisation of its gustation (*carvaṇā*). Hence, *rasa* is not found anywhere in the world except in *kāvya* and *nāṭya*.<sup>2</sup> In *Locana*, he claims that “the relishing of *Rasa* is a super normal (*alaukika*) delight. It consists in savouring the *vibhāvas*, etc., ... and it must not be degraded to the level of memory and inference, or the like” (*Locana* 1.18 L). Subsequently, Abhinavagupta explains that the realisation of *rasa* in an obstacle (*vighnas*) free<sup>3</sup> theatrical performance is akin to directly experiencing one’s own consciousness. In this way, *rasa* is subjective as it constitutes a direct perception, an inner mental experience (*mānaspratyakṣa*) of taste (*āsvādana*), and, hence, an experiential reality. K. P. Mishra (2006) elaborates that for Abhinavagupta, *rasa* is *jñānarūpa* (of the form of knowledge), which aligns with his non-dualistic epistemology, which holds that knowledge (*jñāna*) is not dependent on external objects (*vastu*) but is intrinsic to the knower. Therefore, “*Rasa* cannot exist separately from consciousness” (Mishra 82). Unlike the ordinary situations of love, anger, envy, etc., which can be both pleasurable and painful, drama, a combinatory effect of *vibhāva*, *anubhāva*, etc., elicits pleasure because what is being relished, even the pathetic or sorrowful (*karuṇa*), is the generalised emotions or emotion-essences in one’s own consciousness which “is nothing but *camatkāra*”, the blissfulness of self-cogitation (Deshpande 79). Abhinavagupta elaborates on this by stating that in an aesthetic experience, there is an “absence of sensations of pleasure and pain, etc., as it is the case of entering into our own self (*svātmānupraveśa*), which is immersion (*āveśa*) in the latent traces of our own sentiments of delight, etc., reawakened by the corresponding determinants, etc., which are generalised” (Mishra 114).<sup>4</sup>

In explicating the process of *Rasa*-realisation, Abhinavagupta follows Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka’s notion of generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), which posits that the aesthetic experience of *nāṭya* places both the object and the subject in a universalised position. Nāyaka argues that *nāṭya* enables the relish of generalised emotions, a power residing in the poetic words, which he terms *bhāvanā* or *bhāvakatva*, leading to *bhoga* or *bhojakatva* in the subject. An important aspect of generalisation is that neither the aesthetic emotions belong to a specific individual nor the aesthete is tied to a particular time, place, or identity. Raniero Gnoli (2015) explains that *bhāvanā*, also known as “the power of revelation... has the faculty of suppressing the thick layer of mental stupor (*moha*) occupying our own consciousness...” (45). Consequently, the aesthete attains a universalised state and experiences bliss (*ānanda*), which is akin to spiritual bliss. This transformation occurs due to the predominance of *sattva*,<sup>5</sup> as the process of generalisation severs the connection with the personal, allowing for an impersonalised aesthetic realisation. Abhinavagupta concurs with Nāyaka that *Rasāsvāda* bears a resemblance to *Brahmāsvāda* and aligns with his thesis of generalisation, acknowledging that “the relishing of *Rasa* bears a family resemblance to the relishing of the ultimate *brahman*” (*Locana* 2.4 L). However, Abhinava extends the thesis of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* by linking it to his metaphysical position of the Self (*ātman*). In doing so, he also refines Nāyaka’s notion of poetic revelation (*bhāvanā*), arguing that *rasa* arises not through linguistic power alone but is a direct experience in consciousness (*mānaspratyakṣa*). To him, generalised emotions exist as latent impressions (*vāsanās*) in all human beings due to their past and present births, allowing for a sympathetic resonance (*hṛdayasaṃvāda*) even with the extraordinary deeds like Rāma’s ocean-crossing which Nāyaka thinks is not possible as the spectators can only identify with the ordinary situations. By providing a locus to the free-floating emotion-essences in the universality of Self, Abhinavagupta has not only asserted the universality of aesthetic emotions but also their relishing within one’s own consciousness.



Furthermore, Abhinavagupta's theory that the Universal Self expands over all limited selves generalises the spectators' consciousness into a collective singularity (*ekaghanatā*). In an obstacle-free theatrical performance, where individual spectators form a collective aesthetic unity and are not engrossed in their personal ego-centric consciousness, the shared generality or *ekaghanatā* transforms into a *ānandaikaghanatā*, that is, aesthetic relishing of drama by all spectators. Abhinavagupta has argued that "pleasure given by a spectacle increases when there are a large number of spectators" (Gnoli, 2015, 57). Further, in such moments, the elimination of the "practical" personalities of the spectators, different each from the other—is succeeded by a state of consciousness, a "knowing subject" which is, unique, "generalised", not circumscribed by any determination of space, time, etc." (Gnoli, XXXVI-XXXVII). This collective absorption mirrors his tantric philosophy, where self-expansion occurs through shared immersion. In *Tantrāloka* (hereafter *TA*), he describes consciousness as "pervasive of all" but tending toward contraction in individuals, whereas mutual reflection expands it into bliss (Abhinavagupta, *TĀ Vol. VII* 28/373b-374a). Similarly, in *nāṭya*, the shared resonance (*hṛdayasaṁvāda*) of generalised emotions and audience identification (*tanmayibhāvana*) dissolves fragmented subjectivities into a unified, impersonal aesthetic consciousness. Thus, universalised emotions and collective uniformity, which are essential for the *rasa* experience, find support in Abhinavagupta's theory of the Self.

With an emphasis on generalisation, *nāṭya* leads to a transcendental aesthetic experience where the duality of subject and object dissolves, resulting in a repose (*viśrānti*) within one's own consciousness. In *Comparative Aesthetics* (Vol. I) (1959), K. C. Pandey explicates Abhinavagupta's five-level theory of aesthetic experience: *sensory*, *imaginative*, *emotive*, *kathartic*, and *transcendental*. The first three levels involve sensing, imagining, and emotionally connecting with the drama. At the kathartic level, where spectators identify themselves with dramatic characters and their emotions, self-forgetfulness takes place.<sup>6</sup> In this state, "the subject is completely freed from all objective references as also from temporal and spatial relations, which are due to limitations of individuality" (Pandey 138). This level, as Nāyaka also argues, allows the aesthete to transcend personal constraints and become a Universalised Subject, a state that goes beyond individual physical, psychological, and volitional activities (Pandey 76). However, even at this stage, the universalised aesthetic object still influences the Universalised Subject. Abhinavagupta further elaborates that on a higher level, the *Vyātireka-Turiyāṭita*,<sup>7</sup> the basic mental state sinks into the subconscious, dissolving the subject-object distinction and enabling the self to experience its *ānanda*, an introverted resting state within itself. Thus, for Abhinavagupta, "the experience of *ānanda*, *vimarśa* or rest of universal subject in itself" (Pandey 141) defines the highest aesthetic experience, where consciousness (*saṁvedana*), dense with bliss (*ānanadghana*), is directly relished.<sup>8</sup>

This aligns with Abhinavagupta's broader metaphysical stance that the Self is universal, and drama is a realisation of this universality, an experience of pure, undifferentiated bliss (*ānanda*). K. C. Pandey (1959) describes this state as an experience of the Self itself—pure and unmixed bliss—a condition where aesthetic enjoyment transforms into unhindered, transcendental awareness (140-141). As Gauri Mahulikar (2018) explains, at the highest level of *rasa*, "the object ceases to exist, and the self becomes one with the ultimate bliss called *ānanda*. First, the object is relished, and later, the enjoyer himself becomes relish" (73). This means that the spectator, initially engaged with the aesthetic object, eventually dissolves into the very essence of bliss, where subject-object distinction no longer holds.

According to Abhinavagupta, *rasa* consists of repose (*viśrānti*), devoid of impediment and, thus, all *rasas* have the form of bliss, emphasising that while ordinary emotions may be unsettling, their transformation into *rasa* enables a state of purified joy.<sup>9</sup> Gnoli argues that this repose is "nothing but a state of independence, of liberty from any extraneous solicitation and hence



of rest, of 'lysis' in our own Self" (XLI). The pleasure of aesthetic repose is a "tasting" (*āsvādana*) of the self, where consciousness becomes aware of its own fullness and absolute freedom (Gnoli XLIV). This moment of repose, also called *ekaghanatā* (a compact mass of light), represents the inherent fullness of the self, a state where desires vanish, leaving only pure awareness of bliss, although it is gustatory. Thus, Abhinavagupta's metaphysical position of the Self provides strong support to his dramaturgy (i) toward the idea of generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), and (ii) in providing an impersonal medium, that is, the Universalised Subject for the Rasa-relishing. Drawing on Abhinavagupta's theory of aesthetics backed by his metaphysical position, in what follows, we argue that Nietzsche's aesthetics of tragic drama can be analysed *vis-a-vis* his distinct paradigm of the metaphysics of Will, which also provides an impersonal mode of subjectivity in the idea of Dionysiac consciousness.

### Aesthetic Experience in Tragedy

Nietzsche's analysis of Greek *Attic* tragedy is rooted in the dynamic interplay of the Apollonian and Dionysian drives (*Triebe*) that "mostly [exist] in open conflict, stimulating and provoking (*reizen*) one another" (*BT* § 1). For Nietzsche, tragedy is a supreme art, a great stimulant of life. With the mutuality of the two opposite art forces, tragedy is an aesthetic phenomenon that presents the primal truth of the illusoriness of our separate individualities in a pleasurable way. The tragedy performs two tasks of revealing the universal suffering through the tragic myth, and also providing joy in suffering. This dual-function is the Dionysiac effect, although the Apolline art provides clarity to the primal truth. Nietzsche has argued that tragedy "arose from the tragic chorus and was originally chorus" (*BT* § 7). Chorus, essentially, is Dionysian music, the dithyrambs sung in the praise of God Dionysian.<sup>10</sup> It symbolises a merger with the primordial unity in the ecstasy of self-dissolution in collective music-making and is the highest realisation that our separate individualities are ultimately illusory. The Greek tragedy as a story of suffering is thus born out of the Dionysiac to which the Apollonian character and stage action provides clarity. Each tragic myth narrates universal suffering in the inevitable downfall of the hero. The tragedy in the "breakdown of the *principium individuationis*"<sup>11</sup> (understood as our own individuality in the Apollonian creation as beautiful appearances) offers a glimpse into the essence of the Dionysiac (*BT* § 1). But, at the same time, it "expresses the omnipotent Will behind the *principium individuationis*, as it were, life going on eternally beyond all appearance and despite all destruction" (*BT* § 16). Tragedy, thus, elicits pleasure, a "metaphysical solace", i.e., despite all suffering and "all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable" (*BT* § 7). This aesthetic phenomenon of pleurability in the destruction of a hero is predicated upon Schopenhauer's idea of the reality of the 'will to live'.

In *BT*, Nietzsche alludes to Schopenhauer, particularly his metaphysics of the Will of which the whole world is a representation. Schopenhauer describes the Will as the fundamental force of existence, characterised by insatiable striving that leads to suffering. "All willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering" (Schopenhauer *WWR* I 38). It has been argued that the notions of the Dionysian and Apollonian symbolise Schopenhauer's ideas of will and its representation, respectively. Julian Young (1992) argues that the Apollonian reflects Schopenhauer's "world as representation", maintaining the illusory, phenomenal nature of reality through the principle of individuation, while the Dionysian transcends this, revealing the "primordial unity" of existence, akin to Schopenhauer's "universal Will" (33–34). While for Schopenhauer, music, which is a direct copy of the will, can provide a temporary respite from the throb of will, Nietzsche considers music, the aesthetic counterpart of the non-aesthetic Will, as a medium to reach the primordial will, for it is that identification which elicits joy in oneness with 'one living being' (*BT* § 17). He argues, "For brief moments, we are truly the primordial being itself, and we feel its unbounded greed and lust for being; the struggle, the agony, the

destruction of appearances, all this now seems to us to be necessary, given the uncountable excess of forms of existence thrusting and pushing themselves into life, given the exuberant fertility of the world-Will" (*BT* § 17). Raymond Geuss (1999) observes that while the dissolution of identity is feared, it also provides "the highest and most intense kind of pleasure... (which) results from the fact that in losing our individuality, we are... returning to our original state, a state which is metaphysically speaking what we always really were" (XVIII). Nonetheless, as this truth is repulsive, the Apollonian semblance that it is a myth protects us from life-negating mood. As Aaron Ridley (2007) explains, "Borne neat, this energy would destroy us. But (just) touching base with it refreshes our appetite for life and returns us reinvigorated to the world of Apollo" (15).

The Dionysiac effect of a merger with the primordial unity, we contend essentially, is the generalisation of the aesthetic situation that facilitates aesthetic delight. This Dionysiac phenomenon functions in two ways: (i) the generalisation of suffering and aesthetic emotions and (ii) the deindividuation of spectators into a collective consciousness, identifying their unity with the primordial unity. Nietzsche considers that the chorus, the very nerve of theatrical performance, as arousing fear and pity (not in the Aristotelian sense of purgation) provides a vision to the Dionysian abyss, a continuous cycle of destruction and renewal. Nietzsche has argued that each tragic hero on the stage is the suffering god Dionysus. The downfall of the tragic hero represents the dissolution of individuality. The notion of Dionysus as an ambivalent, frenzied, wandering god who was torn apart by the Titans and reborn is an epitome of suffering. Tragedy, thus, generalises suffering and, with it, the emotions of pity and fear, through the impersonalised medium of Dionysian suffering. The primal pain and contradiction are what binds the whole world; joy in fulfilled desires and pain in unfulfilled desires. As a direct access to the abyss of Will, Dionysian music also generalises aesthetic consciousness in the other direction of aesthetic creativity. Nietzsche does not agree with the Schopenhauerian categories of subjective and objective arts. Taking the case of lyric poetry, a Dionysian art and a precursor to tragedy, he emphasises that it is not subjective in nature despite the excessive use of "I" by the poet. His point is that a lyric poet is immersed in the Dionysiac consciousness prior to the display of a chromatic scale of his passions and emotions in his poetry. The Dionysiac consciousness, mirroring the inner stirrings of the Will, rather finds symbolic interpretation through the Apollonian contemplation by way of poetic creativity. In fact, the lyric poet "needs all the stirrings of passion" and, driven by the Apollonian impulse, perceives all of nature as "nothing but that which eternally wills, desires, longs" (*BT* § 5). Likewise, the chorus in the tragedy arouses emotions by offering a "truer, more real, more complete image of existence" (*BT* § 8).

By essence, the Dionysian music is ecstatic and transformative. In the tragic drama, the Dionysian chorus also functions in de-individuating the audience in collective oneness. The loud music of the choric sections decontextualises the audience from their empirical, practical lives and stimulates their emotions to the artistic world of events on the stage. In the tragic chorus, Nietzsche sees the primal dramatic phenomenon, "seeing oneself transformed and acting as though one had truly entered another body, another character" (*BT* § 8). As a matter of fact, enchantment is important to dramatic art. Nietzsche argues, "Enchantment is the precondition of all dramatic art" (*BT* § 8). As tragedy exerts enchantment, this epidemic Dionysiac spell, geared to self-forgetfulness, results in a momentary becoming one with the primordial unity. This aesthetic phenomenon is transformative and dramatic in the sense that one becomes a part of the larger reality. The audience decontextualised is transformed into the aesthetic world of drama, that is, experiencing a merger with the primordial unity that elicits pleasure in the metaphysical solace. As Christopher Janaway (2014) explains, "The Dionysian effect of tragedy is its alleged ability to dissolve the sense of individuality and merge the participant or spectator into a 'primal oneness' or 'primal being' (*das Ur-Eine* or *Ursein*)" (45). However, despite fear

and pity in the tragic annihilation of individuality, the tragedy elicits joy in that “we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being [or reality], with whose procreative lust we have become one” (BT § 16). In generalising suffering and aesthetic emotions as well as spectators’ consciousness, tragedy transforms the painful reality into an aesthetic delight. The Dionysiac consciousness, which leads one to immerse in the primordial unity, is nothing but an aesthetically mediated consciousness, one that provides an impersonal medium to experience pleasure in tragedy.

We have analysed how both *nāṭya* and tragedy characterise aesthetic experiences as pleasurable, an experience of universal reality, that is, relishing one’s own consciousness and becoming one with the primordial unity, respectively. We have argued that the metaphysical positions of Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche, namely, the Universal Self and the world-Will, respectively, provide bases to the twofold function of generalisation, making *nāṭya* and tragedy a universalised experience. Situating the two dramatic theories in their metaphysical conceptions is not only insightful in understanding the nature of aesthetic experience, it is also insightful in dealing with the question about the subjectivity of this experience. The aesthetic experience of the two dramatic arts is transformative not only in decontextualising the aesthetes from their particularities but also in making it a new engagement with oneself. Thus, the legitimate question here is *what it is like* for an aesthetic experience to have its impact on the nature of self? The self in such transcendental experiences of dramatic arts transforms from the subjectivity encumbered in the personal to a de-centred space of impersonality. We conceptualise the idea of the aesthetic self of the transformed experiences in the impersonal mode of consciousness.

### Impersonalised Subjectivity and Aesthetic Self

The discussion on the aesthetic experience in *nāṭya* and tragedy reveals that both dramatic arts emphasise the transformative nature of the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience, characterised by universalised consciousness, is impactful as one no longer remains the same self. There is a discontinuity from the self, encumbered in the personal, to what it is to experience from a universal plane, i.e., relishing the self’s blissfulness in *nāṭya* and a metaphysical joy of being one with the primordial unity in tragedy. What brings Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche on the same platform, despite their differences, is that both perceive the aesthetic experience as pleasurable although the locus of pleasure is understood by them differently. For Abhinavagupta, aesthetic experience is a delight (*ānanda*) as the very nature of the Self is bliss, and one experiences basic emotions rising and subdued within one’s consciousness. The *ekaghanatā* (compact mass) of consciousness, devoid of any obstacles, is blissful. The nature of joy in tragedy, despite the destruction of a hero, is pleasurable in being part of ‘*one* living reality’.

Another significant common feature that we find both in Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche is that they emphasise aesthetic experience as subjective. Abhinavagupta has argued that the *rasa* is a gustatory experience fundamentally distinct from the ordinary cognition of objective things. It is also not the permanent mental state residing in one’s consciousness. Rather, it is relishing them awakened due to the dramatic presentation. Gnoli translates one of the passages of *Abh.*, in which *rasa* is described as:

... just that reality (*artha*) by which the determinants, the consequents, and the transitory feelings, after having reached a perfect combination (*samyag yoga*), relation (*sambandha*), [and] conspiracy (*aikāgrya*)... make the matter of a gustation consisting of a form of consciousness free of obstacle and different from the ordinary ones. This Rasa differs from the permanent feelings, consists solely in this state of gustation and is not an objective thing (*siddhasvabhāva*), lasts exactly as long as the gustation, and does not lie on any time separate from it. (78)

The gustatory nature of aesthetic experience is a mark of it being an experience by a subject even though the subject is on the universalised plane. In other words, it is not an owner-less

experience. Hence, the question of inquiring about the nature of the subjectivity of this experience becomes a legitimate one. The gustation as a perception in one's consciousness, devoid of all externalities, is a clear indicator that subjectivity here is no longer geared in the personal. It rather marks a freedom from the personal, empirical mode of consciousness. The aesthetic context of tragedy, with the primacy of the Dionysiac immersiveness that decontextualises the spectators from their particularities, makes the tragic pleasure an experience, although a momentary one. The Dionysiac ecstasy of fusion with the primordial unity is an exposure to tragic truth and, yet, an aesthetic delight in life's indestructibility. What is central to both *nāṭya* and tragedy is that there is a discontinuity of the self engaged in the personal to have an aesthetic pleasure. As the nature of aesthetic pleasure pertains to the experience of rest in one's own consciousness or being part of a living reality, self-dissolution becomes axiomatic to such a universalised experience. Immersiveness in universalised experience, nonetheless, has an intense reflexivity of experiencing oneself transformed. This transformative experience requires a new self, an aesthetic self, the *experiencer* of the aesthetic rapture. The aesthetic self, which both *nāṭya* and tragedy account for, draws its dynamism from a universalised or impersonalised plane.

Abhinavagupta's exposition of the *rasa* is an experience where the subject-object duality vanishes in the Universalised Subject. In other words, the subjectivity becomes de-personalised. We can say that the Universalised Subject is an impersonalised mode of subjectivity to experience repose in the Self. In Nietzsche's analysis of tragedy, we find that the Dionysiac consciousness, as it mirrors the non-aesthetic will, is an impersonalised mode of enjoying the aesthetic spectacle of oneness with the primordial unity. The transformed self, the aesthetic self, thus, draws its subjectivity from the impersonal modes of consciousness that the two dramatic arts provide. An important point about the universalised experience of the two dramatic arts is that there is a reflexive awareness of the transformative moments. That is to say, the subjectivity of the aesthetic pleasure in immersiveness in a universalised experience has a reflective consciousness. This is clearly elucidated by Abhinavagupta, where the repose in one's own Self is the *ānanda* or *vimarśa* aspect of consciousness with the subdued affections (which also make it distinct from the spiritual experience of a perfect *yogin*), distinctly a reflective awareness of relishing the fullness of consciousness. Although the Nietzschean paradigm is entirely different from that of Abhinavagupta, we can also appreciate this point about the reflexivity of 'tragic pleasure'. What is undeniable is that the 'tragic pleasure' is an experience of the subject, the truly aesthetic spectator, experiencing momentarily the illusoriness of one's own individuality in becoming part of a primordial unity. The very reason that it is momentary is because it is repulsive, life-negating and, yet, the spectator desires to take delight in it confirms the subjectivity of the aesthetic spectacle.

The conceptualisation of the transformative nature of the two dramatic arts is textured in the unique nature of aesthetic experience that is characterised by universalised consciousness. What is important here is that aesthetic pleasure is derived in a sort of "oneness" with the universal reality. For such an experience, there has to be freedom from the first-personal salience, that is, subjectivity centred in personal concerns, as well as freedom from the aesthetic emotion-essences. It has been argued that aesthetic creativity, as well as receptivity of art-emotions, takes place from an impersonal plane. In his complex phenomenology of aesthetic emotions, K. C. Bhattacharyya, one of the finest contemporary Indian philosophers, in his essay, "The Concept of Rasa" (2011), has spoken about the semi-mythological idea of the 'Heart Universal', an impersonal, *some one* person or *any one* person from whose centre one experiences aesthetic emotions. He has argued that the subject of aesthetic emotions is a contemplative subject, a 'felt-person-in-general', distanced both from the first-order feelings toward an object and a sympathetic response toward the object with which a person is directly involved. Thus, he argues that "the character in the drama is not imagined by me as an actual person: I imagine

someone imagining the character as an actual person, and I sympathise with this imaginary 'someone' as the second person" (Bhattacharya 199). In his article, "Impersonal Subjectivity of Aesthetic Emotion", Bijoy H. Boruah (2016) builds on the same framework and argues for a 'secondary self', an aesthetic self, as the *experiencer* of the fictional objects. For him, freedom from the first-personal salience is salient to the cultivation of a disinterested attitude to emotionally responding to the fictional character. The discontinuity of the self, which is usually the centre of consciousness engaged in personal concerns, is what he calls the "radical crossing of ontic boundary", giving birth to a new self, the aesthetic self that draws its subjective dynamism of fresh engagement with the fictional object from an impersonal mode of subjectivity (136). The aesthetic self, for him, is the subject of a new unity between the subject and the object in the aesthetic appreciation of a fictional world. And as he asserts, "It is only as an unindividuated, de-centred self, an impersonal *someone*, that I can be the subject of an aesthetic experience" (136). What is common in Bhattacharya's notion of the 'imaginary second person' and Boruah's idea of the 'secondary self' or aesthetic self is the centrality of the question of aesthetic appreciativeness of artistic emotions. The dramatic contexts of *nāṭya* and tragedy, characterising aesthetic experience as a universalised consciousness, however, tend to overcome the engagement with the aesthetic object. In Abhinavagupta's case, the subject-object duality is overcome in the dramatic experience, and there is an intense introversion of the subject, the impersonalised, Universalised Subject, to experience a repose in one's own Self. Similarly, tragedy elicits pleasure in the experience of being part of *one* living reality. The two dramatic arts rather generalise the aesthetic emotions as well as the aesthetes in the collective spectators' unity to the extent of providing impersonalised modes of consciousness where the aesthetic self is the bearer of a reflexive, transformative self-experience.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the nature of aesthetic experience in *nāṭya* and tragedy as expounded by Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche, respectively. Analysing their aesthetics *vis-a-vis* their metaphysical positions has shed important light on their dramaturgies and further explicated the ground to conceptualise the idea of subjectivity of the aesthetic experience. The investigation of this question becomes important; for the aesthetic experience of *nāṭya* and tragedy are universalised experiences of aesthetic pleasure in immersiveness in the universal nature of reality. Although the two thinkers present contrasting world-views, a blissful experience in repose in Abhinavagupta, and the experience of primordial reality that is suffused with the fear of the loss of individuality in Nietzsche, it is the pleasurable dimension of the universalised experience in the two dramatic art forms, that has provided us with the context of exploring the notion of subjectivity. We have argued that the metaphysical themes of the Universal Self and world-Will in Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche, respectively, not only provide support to the idea of generalisation in the two dramatic arts but they also provide the impersonal modes of subjectivity. The Universalised Subject and Dionysiac consciousness (an aesthetic counterpart of the non-aesthetic Will) in the two dramatic arts, respectively, serve as the impersonal mediums of consciousness for the aesthetic self to be the bearer of the transformative moments of experiencing a different plane of reality.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Ato vyākhyāṭr-ṇaṭa-sāmājikābhiprāyeṇa tasyaiva prādhānyam...* (Abh. Vol. I 291)
- <sup>2</sup> *Siddhasya kasyacit prameyābhūtasya rasasyābhāvāt | Kim tasya etaddhi vibhāvādāya iti | Alaukika evāyaṁ carvaṇopayogī vibhāvādivyavahārah | Kvānyatreṭṭhaṁ dṛṣṭam iti ced bhūṣaṇam etad asmākam alaukikatva-siddhau |* (Abh. Vol. I 299)
- <sup>3</sup> Abhinavagupta identifies seven obstacles in aesthetic experience: (1) *Pratipattāvayogyatā sambhāvanā virahonāma*, the lack of verisimilitude. A consent of heart is possible if the characters are of extra-ordinary nature; (2) *Svagataparagatatvaniyamena deśakālaviśeṣāvesaḥ*, which involves experiencing the emotions in a personal manner negating the aesthetic pleasure; (3) *Nijasukhādīvivaśībhāvaḥ*, where the spectator is too engrossed in oneself; (4) *Pratītyupāyavaikalyam* is the absence of proper means of perception due to an actor's lack of skills or efforts; (5) *Sphuṭatvābhāvaḥ*, the absence of clarity in perception. In poetry, drama, and dance, unambiguous words and distinct *abhinaya* are essential to elicit the desired reaction from spectators; (6) *Apradhānatā*, referring to the lack of a predominant factor, where minor elements overshadow main characters or complex ideas; and (7) *Sanśayayogaśca*, the presence of doubt in the recognition of *sthāyibhāva* and corresponding *rasa*. (See Mishra 119-131 for detailed accounts).
- <sup>4</sup> *Atra tu svātmaikatattvaniyamāsambhāvāt na viśayāveśavaivaśyaṁ svānupra-veśātparagatatvaniyamābhāvāt na tāsthyāśphuṭatve, tad vibhāvādisādhāraṇyavaśasamprabuddhoccitanijaratnīvaśānāveśavaśācca na vighnāntarādīnāṁ sambhava ityevocām bahuśaḥ |* (Abh. Vol. I 299)
- <sup>5</sup> Nāyaka draws on Sāmkhya's three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—to explain how human experiences are shaped by their interactions. In ordinary life, these *guṇas* manifest in different degrees, with often one prevailing over the other, leading to *bhoga*, or experiences of pleasure, pain, and insentience. Nāyaka claims that the aesthetic experience of *nāṭya* is characterized by *sattva*, infused with bliss (*ānanda*) and akin to the tasting (*āsvāda*) of the supreme *Brahman*. However, Abhinavagupta challenges this view because, in both *Śaiva* and *Vedānta* traditions, *sattva*—along with the other *guṇas*—is regarded as a product of *māyā*. For Abhinavagupta, however, the aesthetic experience is transcendental. It does not belong to the field of *māyā* and is free from all *guṇas*.
- <sup>6</sup> Abhinavagupta's *kathartical* level is not to be conflated with the Aristotelian *catharsis* in tragedy which implies the purgation of emotions such as pity and fear. In *nāṭya*, *katharsis* is not cleansing but a transformation of emotions into universalised forms through generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), leading to aesthetic repose. Nietzsche also differs from the Aristotelian notion of *catharsis* claiming that such notion reduces tragedy to mere psychological or moral responses, thus overlooking its aesthetic significance. By describing *catharsis* as a "pathological discharge", Nietzsche rejects the idea that the purpose of tragedy is to heal or provide moral lessons (BT §22).
- <sup>7</sup> Abhinavagupta posits that Śaivism prescribes five states of experience: wakefulness (*Jāgrat*), dream (*Svapna*), sound sleep (*Suṣupti*), transcendental (*Turiya*), and pure consciousness (*Turiyātīta*) (TĀ Vol VI 10/228b-229a). The last stage, i.e., *Turiyātīta* signifies a complete transcendence of objectivity. This state is, however, further categorized into two: (i) *Vyatireka-Turiyātīta*, where objectivity remains subtly in the subconscious, and (ii) *Avyatireka-Turiyātīta*, where objectivity is completely absent. The latter represents the state of transcendence, marking a state from where there is no descent to lower states (Pandey 141-142).
- <sup>8</sup> *Asmānmate saṁvedanam evānandaghanam āsvādyate |* (Abh Vol. I 304)
- <sup>9</sup> *Hṛdayaviśrāntir antarāyaśūnyaviśrāntīśarīratvāt |... Ityanandarūpatā sarvarasānām |* (Abh Vol. I 297)
- <sup>10</sup> Throughout Nietzsche's works, from *BT* to his later writings, the Dionysian remains a central theme in his philosophy, often surpassing the significance of the Apollonian. This is notably highlighted in *Twilight of the Idols (TI)*, where he proclaims himself "the final disciple of the philosopher Dionysus" (Nietzsche *TI* 91), reinforcing the Dionysian as central to his philosophy. In *Ecce Homo (EH)*, he reiterates his identity as "a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus" (Nietzsche *EH* 3), further establishing the Dionysian as a fundamental principle in his thought.
- <sup>11</sup> This Schopenhauerian idea of *principium individuationis*, the individuation or separation of things to which we apply the principle of sufficient reason ordinarily is an illusion. The reality of 'Will', which we know in our own willing, non-empirically, is beyond individuation and has a primordial unity.



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# “Poet, be seated at the piano”: The Imperative of Change and the Sounds of Music in the Poems of Wallace Stevens

SHOBHA ELIZABETH JOHN

**Abstract:** The abundance of musical terms and metaphors in Wallace Stevens’s poetry relate to his interrogation of music as a temporal artform that can address a world of change. Music represents the self-sufficient and truly abstract art capable of dispensing with the mimetic imperative completely – something poetry may never fully accomplish. Contemplations on the pre-poetic in his work also relate to the temporality of music, allowing emphasis on processes over products. This paper traces the multiple duties assigned to music in Stevens’s poems and ascertain the role of a time-bound art in addressing a dynamic universe. It also discusses how the essentially “pure” origins of music embody the model for poems to follow to qualify as true products of the imagination in a constantly changing world.

**Keywords:** Change, music, mimesis, modernist representation, temporality

Virginia Woolf’s observation that “on or around December 1910, human character changed”<sup>1</sup> reflects the effect of Roger Fry’s 1910 ‘Post-Impressionist Exhibition’<sup>2</sup> on the masses of London. Though highly criticized and ridiculed at the time, this art exhibition marked a major climacteric in early twentieth century art. Woolf continued by saying that all human relations shifted and “when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature”. This shift was heralded in by particularized events such as the exhibition, the influence of sociocultural and technological developments of the time – the proliferation of small printing houses and scientific inventions like the light bulb and the X-ray – as well as the global political unrest of the era which led to the World Wars, redefining all past human experiences. These factors compelled the early 20th century artistic circle to deliberately break away from traditional modes of thought and representation in order to address contemporary themes. Self-reflexive and novel structural forms replaced static narratives which were rendered incapable of sufficiently representing a chaotic, changeable and dynamic world, a notion that prompted Marcel Duchamp to paint the Modernist classic “Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2”. The constant flux and whirl of change are undeniable features of the early 20th century world, however uncomfortable they prove to be.

As borders and mediums blurred, art became an amalgamation of multiple perspectives, an experimental ground framed by intermediality for poets, many of whom worked day jobs in offices and wrote poetry simultaneously. Among them was Wallace Stevens, an American insurance company executive cum pioneer of Modern poetry, who in his writings paid great attention to the change and transformation that characterized the world around him. For Stevens, life is motion<sup>3</sup>. The abundance of musical terms and references is another conspicuous feature of Stevens’s poetry. Through musical metaphors, Stevens addresses a world of change and the art of poetry that attempts to speak to its own times.

Change is central to the poem “Domination of Black” from Stevens’s debut poetry collection *Harmonium* (1923). Uncertainty dominates the room with a fireplace where Stevens creates an ominous environment chiselled out of well-chosen words and forbidding images. The movement from generalization to personalization in the poem parallels the transition from partial to complete darkness, from twilight to night. Every element in the poem is in a state of doing – nothing stays static. Each object continually relates itself to and mimics the activity of other things with which they do not essentially share any resemblance. Marianne Moore’s poem “The Steeple-Jack” exemplifies this idea by verbally painting a seaside town where all objects are identified based on similarities – the waves are “as formal as the scales on a fish” and the sea “purple as the peacock’s neck is paled to greenish azure”<sup>4</sup>. The theme of transition thus clearly gains artistic pertinence in the Modernist schema.

There is an abundance of images that indicate change and movement in “Domination of Black”, starting with the fire in the hearth that embodies kinetic energy. The season changes, the leaves turn in the wind, the hemlocks come striding, the planets father, the peacocks fly from the boughs of the hemlocks, they cry against the twilight. The fear in the poem stems from uncertainty, a kind of Heideggerian *angst* where it is the ontological absence of the object that creates the affect, and the inability to place it and name it. This idea of the direct revelation of the world through nothingness is more explicit in “The Snow Man”: “For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (Stevens, *CP* 10).<sup>5</sup> For the being existing in the temporal dimension, ‘nowhere’ is not the negation of all possible places but the possibility of place. The Snow Man’s ‘mind of ice’ does not apprehend the ‘sound of the land’ and the ‘misery in the sound of a few leaves’. This nothingness of being lets him behold the absence of ‘everything’ around him, and thereby makes him aware of all things.

The present-continuous ‘turning’ occurs six times in the poem, excluding other variations of the word ‘turn’, and associates itself with the process and the act of change, while ‘wind’ is typically considered as the medium of change with agential power.<sup>6</sup> The phrase “turning in the wind” thus connects itself with an ongoing event of transformation. Stevens employs the wind as an extremely dynamic and perpetually active force in his poetry; the wind blows,<sup>7</sup> pours<sup>8</sup>, shifts<sup>9</sup>, thunders<sup>10</sup> and roars<sup>11</sup>, to list a few instances. In “The Valley Candle”, the blowing of the wind fashions a context of total darkness that enables the imagination to work. Stevens proposes that the only guaranteed certainty to be is through artistic enterprise initiated by the imagination. For him, imagination is the “one reality in this imagined world”<sup>12</sup>.

The metapoetic “Metaphors of a Magnifico” also contemplates transition and the process involved. Here, Stevens guides the reader on a journey from thinking about something to experiencing the actual thing; parallelly, he also demonstrates the process of writing poetry – of ideas taking shape, being discarded and rewritten. The starting idea of twenty men crossing a bridge into twenty different villages, although it is physically the same village, highlights the weight given to individual experience and subjective response in the Modern era. The poem emphasises how experience takes supremacy when the clump of the boots sound over the bridge and the village rises into view. Abstract ideas are set aside when the thing itself is at hand – “not ideas about the thing but the thing itself” as Stevens puts it.<sup>13</sup> The state of ‘doing’ and not just ‘being’ also reflects in the white walls that “*rises* through fruit trees” and the boots that “*clump* on the boards of the bridge” (Stevens, *CP* 19; italics mine). The village itself is a collection of particulars that are not immobile but come out to meet the men halfway. This ‘doing’ ties in with the Modernist mantra that a thing is what it does.

For Stevens, the poet’s participation in reality, and in the reinvention of it is by a direct addressal this reality. Karl Marx’s epigrammatic thesis, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it”,<sup>14</sup> can be extrapolated to the Modernist artistry where a re-creation of reality effecting a rupture from past modes of representation become cardinal. As Richard Allen Blessing notes, “[I]n the continually shifting techniques, subjects, images,

moods, and tones of *The Collected Poems* Wallace Stevens demonstrates his solution to the modern poet's problem of how to present growth, motion and organicism in a work of art" (6). Stevens's poetical discourses on change and transformation often bring in music as the medium to address the contemporary world. Poetry and music, both being arts essentially made up of sounds, are inextricably connected for Stevens. Barbara Holmes opines that "music dominates the Stevens canon . . . He was both listener and shaper . . ." (7).<sup>15</sup>

The poet-musician is a recurring figure in Steven's poetry, which amplifies the interconnectedness of the two arts in his writing and the interstitial space the different mediums come to share. Stevens's musical sense was "so critically acute that a conjunction of the poetical and musical arts in his work was inevitable" (Holmes 10–11). "Mozart, 1935" presents one of Steven's most important poet-musician figures called to address the chaotic world around him by an opening imperative. The use of such imperative sentences in Stevens could be a technique by which he attempts to create order, commanding stations of doing and being. Stevens's personal aversion to disorder might have contributed to this proclivity for a "blessed rage for order" as well.<sup>16</sup> Ideas of chaos and order are extremely important to Stevens, especially in an era of unparalleled change. However, it is not a resolution of chaos but a sense of concurrence that Stevens aims to achieve in his poems, many of which themselves seem wrought in contradicting premises and paradoxical struggles. This concept also perfectly captures the ethos of the era where Moore comments that "it is a privilege to see so much confusion" (Moore 183). The title *Harmonium*, according to Robert Rehder, "demonstrates the strength of this demand, not simply for order, but for an order that establishes a peaceful and aesthetically pleasing concord among the parts of a unified and consistent whole – harmony" (24).

The address in the first line of the poem establishes the presence of two characters in the poem, with one person speaking to the other. The unnamed speaker addresses all artists here when he says, "Poet, be seated at the piano" (Stevens, *CP* 131) – a call to be present at their station of work with the instruments of their art; a call to represent things as they are in the moment with all its cacophony and disorder. This might even signify the merging or influence of one art on the other – a feature characteristic of the era. Ezra Pound advocated that the relationship between poetry and music was to be maintained closely. He argued, "Poets who are not interested in music are, or become, bad poets. . . . poets should never be too long out of touch with musicians. Poets who will not study music are defective" (Pound 42). The situation in the streets and the situation inside the room of the poet appear conspicuously disparate throughout the poem. Incidentally, this involuntarily reflects Mozart's love for the piano concerto, one of his favourite musical forms. "He [Mozart] identified strongly with the concept of the solo piano (himself) set in opposition to the orchestra" (Harrow House 98) – the lone musician against a multitude of voices.

The furore in the street outside is not to distract the poet from his work of addressing this chaos, of 'playing the present'. This implies that the poet cannot be an escapist who creates music to forget the anarchic world outside. As Marianne Moore commented on the art of poetry in her poem "Poetry", "these things are important not because a / high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are / useful" (Moore 135). This usefulness directly relates to how those who are recipients of the art respond to it; and the recipient can only respond to something that is comprehensible to him, that speaks his language and engages in his reality. The disillusioned 20th century man, a witness of war and the breakdown of the world as he knew it, will find no use for abstract romanticism or comfort in crusades that do not address his needs. Stevens thus constantly urged artists to be contemporaneous and speak to their own times. In "Of Modern Poetry", he comments on the duties of the modern poem, and by extension, the poet:

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.  
It has to face the men of the time and to meet  
The women of the time. It has to think about war  
And it has to find what will suffice. (Stevens, *CP* 240)

The learning of speech aids comprehension of meaning. It also designates intentionality in the act of poetry. Further on in the poem, the poet is described as a 'metaphysician in the dark' who twangs strings that pass 'sudden rightness'. This poet-musician producing musical sounds that "wholly contain the mind" is the antithesis of the 'wasted figure' in the "Burghers of Petty Death" who "pounds blank final music" (Stevens, *CP* 362). Empty music and intelligible sounds are inextricably associated with death for the poet who seeks meaning. Stevens's "The Snow Man" asks the listener to not ascribe meaning to the sounds he hears, requiring him to possess "a mind of winter" (Stevens, *CP* 10) – a state of numbness that denotes incapability of response, death and even the absence of soul. Such a state cannot act as the voice of that placates sorrow and dispels grief. This escapism is not acceptable to the Modernist poet whose duty binds him to address the present.

It is the execution of this duty that Stevens illustrates in "Mozart, 1935". The 'war' outside the room should become what the pianist's art is about – the voice of 17 "Poetry is a Destructive Force" (Stevens, *CP* 192). angry fear. The idea of the past as a 'lucid souvenir' in this poem is also seen in the line "Its past was a souvenir" (Stevens, *CP* 239) from "Of Modern Poetry" – reinforcing the 'pastness' of what has been and the need for direct apprehension of the present. The appearance of the word "thou" in conjunction with the "voice of angry fear" outside integrates the past and the present. The obsolete word put into the contemporary context is forced to address the pain and worry of today and not of yesterday – like how Mozart is contemporized in the title of the poem.

The mob, however, does not always realize that their cure lies in their artists. In "Mozart, 1935", they target their anger at the poet for his apparent lack of sympathy or attention, while the speaker's steady instructional voice infuses a sense of calm. Stevens's use of words which do not have any particular meaning such as 'hoo-hoohoo' and 'ric-a-nic' can be interpreted as a verbal representation of the anarchy of the times, the meaningless repetitions that do not make sense. It could also be a manner in which the poet tries to name experiences that the past has not named. The cries in the streets appear as, or rather, must appear as 'cachinnations' to the poet who is to go on practicing his art even amidst this chaos. The fact that the poet chooses to be engaged in something relatively trivial while the people around him suffer enrages the society who throws stones and creates their own sound / noise, but the poet is not to respond in anger. The body in rags could be a representation – the 'souvenir' – of the dead past to which the society is still holding onto. The tension created by their animosity to change makes them hostile to the poet who embraces the change and plays the present. The pain and confusion of that period becomes what the pianist/poet is to write/play about sandwiched between what was and what yet is not – between holding onto a souvenir and dreaming of a future.

The imperative command to "strike the piercing chord" appears as an anomaly in an arpeggio practice session. The chord is to pierce through the uproar in the streets and the deadness of winter, affecting man and nature. Forcefully grabbing the attention of those listening, this chord prepares the stage for the artist to be the voice of anger as well as fear that pervades in that uncertain age. It is this very portrayal of the change, not the denial of it, that can bring about a pacification, a soothing of the sorrow that things have changed and the acceptance that the old has died. The music of the poet is the "airy dream of the future" and the sound "by which sorrow is released / Dismissed, absolved / In a starry placating" (132). Music acts as the placating and uniting force, capable of restoring order to a chaotic world. The references to absolution, starry placating, besieging pain, and wintry sound can all be read as pointers to the birth of Christ. The poet is to preach the good news of forgiveness from sin and relief from pain – the cure for a suffering world.

Performing Mozart's music now involves translating it to a different time on a different instrument, which influences the message or the feeling of the music as well. The music is the same, but the mode of expression and the feeling has changed. The line, "The feeling of Liadoff was changed" (Stevens, *CP* 347) from "Two Tales of Liadoff" echoes a similar idea. This invites the imperative command to "play the present" – things as they are now, with the poet seated at the piano and not



distracted by the endless chaos and cachinnations of the outside world in order to be the voice that can speak to the times. Mozart's music was innovative and grandiose when it was composed, but now it is a souvenir of the past. The challenge is to make relevant what has lost its essence in constant representation. Mozart also died an untimely death at a young age, something that the speaker could be alluding to when he mentions his own advanced age.

The tension between the dichotomies of calm and riot, of change and resistance to it, is again palpable in the last few lines: "The snow is falling / And the streets are full of cries" (Stevens, *CP* 132). The poem does not address the pain in the streets directly; it addresses the music and the poet who is to address the pain. The title 'Mozart, 1935' also suggests the bringing together of the past and the present. By placing Mozart, who was a Classical composer of the 16th century, side by side with 1935 when Modernism and its philosophies are in their full bloom, there is again a convergence of disparity and tension.

The peril of being rendered invalid owing to the poet's inability to make his art communicate to its time on its terms is very real. The pianist is not to muffle his music but "strike the piercing chord" (Stevens, *CP* 132). Production of "voluble but archaic and hard to hear" (347) sounds are not to be encouraged. "Two Tales of Liadoff" from the collection *Parts of a World*, also showcases a pianist practicing on his piano. Anatoly Konstantinovich Lyadov — frequently spelled Liadov (or as Stevens spells it, Liadoff), was a Russian composer, conductor and teacher. The somber tone and the sense of doom pervading the poem are amplified by the black piano of Liadoff; this is the artist addressing the contemporary tragic world. The pianist attempts to superimpose his art and the order it entails by literally playing 'over' a world that is fragmented by war and change. Stevens often took liberties with spelling and word construction — while also concocting words with meanings he decided upon when he needed them. The word 'epitome' is one such word (as is the spelling of 'Liadoff'). The word 'epi' is associated with meanings such as above or upon; consequentially, epitome would signify something beyond or above the 'normal' tone. Liadoff's spatially elevated seat on the clouds and his subject of practice both signify a different viewpoint to apprehending the world. Music as more than just notes and tones is contained in this word; it is something that brings about change, something with soul that resides on a higher plane than where the mortal occupations of chaos and destruction abide.

Stevens's 1937 poem *The Man with the Blue Guitar* takes inspiration from a Blue Period<sup>17</sup> painting of Pablo Picasso titled "The Old Guitarist". This thirty-three-stanza poem begins with a man bending over his blue guitar like a 'shearsman', evoking the picture of a shepherd shearing the sheep; in this case, he shears the day that is green with rich crops for the imagination. The guitarist responds to those who ask for a tune of "things exactly as they are" by saying that "things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" (Stevens, *CP* 165), implying repetition of reality to be a redundant endeavour. The instrument of the guitar, which itself produces music, becomes a metaphor for the imagination which is to produce art. Things as they are is the reality of life as it "picks its way on the blue guitar". The intervention of the guitarist not only contributes to representing reality, but also to transforming it. Mere imitation of life as it is does not contribute to the Modernist aestheticism which was disposed to be more anti-mimetic. By not mimicking, but manipulating and changing art which reflected reality, the artist has the power to change reality itself.

The act of effecting change does not grant the artist supreme powers to impose unity and cohesive order. He can only 'patch up' a fragmented world, not make it whole. The Modernist tendency to focus on parts and not the whole is visible here. The detail patches all point to the whole but in the process achieves new forms themselves as they morph into a projection of their maker himself: "Say that it is the serenade / Of a man that plays a blue guitar" (Stevens, *CP* 166). The 'of' implies fact that it is him playing the music and designates the music as a representation of himself. By singing to the world, the guitarist is also addressing himself. This change of perspective — from looking outward to looking inward — also reflects what poetry and art of the era is in the process of becoming. Such a journey from external experience to internal transformation is at the heart of Stevens's long poem

*Comedian as the Letter C*. It is this intentionality, the consciousness of an intended being, that makes the work of art capable of addressing contemporaneous issues.

Stevens elaborates on transformations effected by art and imagination by extensively employing music, perhaps the only truly abstract artform, as medium. The synthetic quality of music appealed to the Modernist sensibility that sought to reinvent reality and “make it new”.<sup>18</sup> The different roles ascribed to music by Stevens – of music as the truly synthetic object, as capable of addressing change and as the medium to impose order on chaos – converge in “The Idea of Order at Key West” from *Ideas of Order* published in 1936. The poem presents music wielding its power to reenchant reality through a synthetic song. The woman’s singing “beyond the genius of the sea” (Stevens, *CP* 128) encompasses her spirit. The presence of such a spirit forges an affect, ‘causes a cry’ that the listener understands. Her apparent ignorance of the listener and yet, the intentionality inherent in her art, exemplifies the poetic model to effect transformation. The moment of Edenic creation that makes the world appear new and fresh to the observer is contrived by the song she creates. Stevens emphasizes that she was the ‘single artificer’ of the world in which she sang, for she was the maker. ‘Artifice’, for the Modernists, was proof of the artistic labour involved. Every work of art also involves an affirmation as well as a reflection of the individual who created it. The creator takes the ordinary and changes it – transforms it into something beyond the sum of its particulars, and himself changes in the process. The inspiration for the song achieves new forms embodying the soul of the singer.

Stevens places the woman on the shores of the sea as she sings, juxtaposing the voice of the sea and her song. The act of mimesis that the sea is engaged in reflects thematically and structurally in the poem as well, with repeated lines and ideas. Dispensing with the mimetic imperative implies a freedom from being bound by the structure of the world. The sounds of the sea lie in the vicinity of mimesis while the song exemplifies synthetic endeavour. The synthetic power of the imagination is at work in the production of art, and particularly in the production of music which is essentially non-mimetic. The two intermingled sounds in the poem thus present the mimetic and the synthetic forms of art, and thereby initiate a dialogue on how art can be rescued from mindless imitation. The importance of a synthetic origin is well conveyed in the words of William Carlos Williams when he said, “The only realism in art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation” (198).

The lines “But play, you must, / A tune beyond us, yet ourselves...” in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (Stevens, *CP* 165) reflects on the concept of the ‘beyond’. The transition from sea to ocean, from the making of a cry to causing a cry and the capability to understand a cry not of oneself, all show a transition onto a higher plane – something *beyond* where it already is. Art, being a combination of reality and imagination, elevates the ordinary into the realm of the extraordinary. This song changes, transforms and elevates reality, making the poet aware of ‘keener sounds’ and ‘ghostly demarcations’, and in this process becomes aware of himself. This internal transformation created by the woman’s song is the duty of music that poetry and all of art is to emulate.

Kant’s Third Critique suggested that the bridge between pure reason and practical reason could be the work of art. Art, for Kant, is a connecting and unifying force as well as a purposive object. And because it is intentionally created, there is guarantee that the work of art does exist, though duplicitous or ambiguous. While the ‘real’ world might be some kind of illusory projection or hyperreality, the product of artistic creation cannot fail when subjected to any ontological or existential interrogation. The act of conscious creation in the mind guarantees the existence of that which is created, even when all other realities can be doubted out of existence. The world created by the woman was real to her and to those who listened to her song since they “Knew that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made” (Stevens, *CP* 130). Therefore, art’s function as a bridge into the real is all the more relevant during a period of history where the existence of the world made up of fragmented realities and disjointed perspectives is uncertain. This making also represents the model of imaginative subjectivity. The synthetic power of the imagination that is

idiosyncratic to each individual comprises each work of art made. Stevens elaborates on the imagination as “the magnificent cause of being, / The imagination, the one reality / In this imagined world” (Stevens, *CP* 25).

Stevens’s poems maintain an extremely close relationship with the primary states of sound where meanings do not exist. Poems like “Life is Motion” (Stevens, *CP* 83); “Depression Before Spring” (63); “Mozart, 1935” (131–2); and “Page from a Tale” (421–3) all possess strings of consonants and vowels that make no logical sense. This could be a manner by which Stevens’s poetry attempts to dispense of the mimetic imperative and return to epistemic origins. Even while experimenting, poetry has to be careful that it does not fall into the peril of being completely meaningless. Sound by itself is a mechanical product and cannot carry intention. It is intentionality and the presence of soul that differentiates music from sound enabling its transformative quality. Peter Quince, a poet-musician himself, echoed this idea when he mused that “Music is feeling, then, not sound” (Stevens, *CP* 90).

Through this discussion, this paper has attempted to illustrate the cardinal position held by the art of music in the treatment of phenomenon such as transformation and temporality. Music can transcend or outlast its own spatial and temporal limits. It also becomes more than the sum of its parts – changes into something beyond its constituent elements as it is performed. Moreover, it changes and enlarges the presence of its creator or performer. It makes them sing ‘beyond’ what they take inspiration from. The man who plays the tune is the maker of the song that affects the soul of the listener, even when the tune is made from the commonplace. His tune is riddled with the present, but like the pianist in “Mozart, 1935”, he is seated, he is aware and his response to the world is his music. His playing changes things as they are and imposes order over chaos, transcending points of origin and becoming more than the “outer voice of sky and cloud” (Stevens, *CP* 129). If the guitarist is the artist and the guitar, the imagination which he uses to produce his art, the phrase “Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar” (Stevens, *CP* 165) is the crux of Stevens’s poetics and the slogan of the era.

Music, being consciously intentional, does not derive from the prior existence of any one thing. This also accredits it with the quality of being unpredictable and essentially non-repetitive. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche comments that while “concepts contain particulars only as the first forms of abstracted perception, as it were, the separated shell of things” and thus they are ‘abstracta’, music “gives the inmost kernel which precedes all forms, or the heart of things” (Nietzsche 16). Though comprised of both mimetic and non-mimetic elements, music ultimately assumes its identity as an art created purely from the mind and of the mind. This independent abstractness is something Stevens clearly approved of as is evident from the title “It Must Be Abstract” that he assigns to the first section of “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”. “The poem of the act of the mind”<sup>19</sup> is to attempt such abstraction, like the unadulterated origins of music wholly formed in the mind.”

However, poetry’s imitation of such epistemological novelty also creates challenges for the existence of the poem. While Stevens often tends to move towards meaningless sound or sound prior to sense in his poetry, there remains the questions of how far the poem can travel thus and still exist as a poem. If the poem finds itself capable of traveling this distance and achieving autonomy over meanings and mimesis, would it be the end of poetry? Or would it be its fulfilment? Music’s freedom from all obligation to contain words of meaning legitimizes its celebration of just sound. It travels all the way to the land of pure sounds and finds no need to come back. However, poetry attempting to do the same would result in the existence of the poem being questioned; it would lose its identity and thereby abandon a world that requires it to be contemporaneous. Music, being no stranger to change itself, is the one art that can help poetry maintain its connection to the contemporary world. Poetry inspired by such a music of intentionality and inherent change is what the Modernists need for their times. The mind’s capability to return to epistemic points of origin reveals itself most strongly in the art of music. And the challenge music instances Stevens’s poetry is to lean towards the territory of purely synthetic sound and yet retain meaning to affirm its space in contemporaneity.

“The first idea is an imagined thing” (*CP* 387), says Stevens, and this idea cannot be doubted into inexistence. The reinvention of ideas and re-representation of what has been rendered meaningless

by clichéd repetition in the past eras is what the Modernist combats through his singing, through his blue guitar, through his intermedial experiments in art. The hope abides that even when all order seems lost and the world appears discordant and incoherent, art will impose its surety upon human reality:

Some harmonious skeptic soon in a skeptical music  
Will unite these figures of men and their shapes  
Will glisten again with motion, the music  
Will be motion and full of shadows. (Stevens, *CP* 122)

The music and the musician here are not scholars beyond all reproach but ‘skeptics’ creating skeptical music in a skeptical world. But this suffices to ‘unite’ that which is fragmented. The glaring light and weight of ‘primary noon’ is absent here nor is it needed. In fact, it is the very presence of the shadows and the movement of objects that serve to unite the scene of dance. Perhaps, the waltz itself will unleash its powers of transformation and save its skeptical creators from falling into the peril of existential dread and nihilism. Certainty gained through artistic enterprise in an uncertain world “fixes”, “arranges”, “deepens”, and “enchants”<sup>20</sup> [sic] this night humanity lives in. Music, poetry and all art through their dialogue and mediation thus carve centres of certainty in an uncertain world, and “‘help us to live our lives’, not by explaining life, whose demarcations must remain ghostly, but by responding to its own music, its ‘keener sounds’” (Kessler 101).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (Woolf, *Collected Essays*, I 320–321).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionist Exhibition’ organized by critic Roger Fry, was held at London’s Grafton Galleries from 8 November 1910 to 15 January 1911.

<sup>3</sup> See “Life is Motion” (Stevens, *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* 83).

<sup>4</sup> 4 “The Steeple-Jack” (Moore, *The Poems of MARIANNE MOORE* 183–184).

<sup>5</sup> All references to *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* have been abbreviated to *CP*.

<sup>6</sup> The popular phrase ‘wind of change’ is an example of this ingrained idea.

<sup>7</sup> “Valley Candle” (*CP* 51).

<sup>8</sup> “Ploughing on Sunday” (*CP* 20).

<sup>9</sup> 9 “The Wind Shifts” (*CP* 83).

<sup>10</sup> The Comedian as the Letter C (*CP* 32).

<sup>11</sup> “To the Roaring Wind” (*CP* 113).

<sup>12</sup> “Another Weeping Woman” (Stevens, *CP* 25).

<sup>13</sup> See “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself” (Stevens, *CP* 534).

<sup>14</sup> This is the 11th thesis of the *Theses on Feuerbach* that was included in and first published as appendix to *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* by Engels in 1888. (Marx 65).

<sup>15</sup> (Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* 259).

<sup>16</sup> “The Idea of Order at Key West” (Stevens, *CP* 130).

<sup>17</sup> The Blue Period of Picasso refers to the years between 1901 and 1904 in which Picasso produced several paintings that were essentially monochromatic. The somber scenes he painted reflected the artist’s mental unease, emotional turmoil and financial destitution of the time (“Pablo Picasso Blue Period”).

<sup>18</sup> Widely considered as the poster slogan for Modernism, “Make It New” is a phrase popularized by Ezra Pound who even made it the title of a collection of his essays. This aphorism was first coined in Pound’s translation of the Chinese poem *Da Xue*, published as *Ta Hio: The Great Learning*, Newly Rendered into the American Language in 1928 (North).

<sup>19</sup> “Of Modern Poetry” (Stevens, *CP* 240).

<sup>20</sup> “The Idea of Order at Key West” (Stevens, *CP* 130).

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# Cartographing Childhood through a Sense of Loss: Re-contextualization of Cities through Myths, Metaphors, and Fantasies by Children of War

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KANCHI JAIN

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the intricate relationship between children, urban spaces, and the narratives they construct in response to the disruptions of war. It examines how children reimagine cities through myths, metaphors, and fantasies, presenting cities as dynamic entities that shape and are shaped by their inhabitants. The loss of familiar spaces caused by war-induced destruction and militarization of cities destabilize identity formation, prompting children to reinterpret fractured realities and preserve a sense of belonging.

The study underscores the role of visual and symbolic elements as critical tools for reconstructing fragmented realities. These elements transform urban spaces into sites of memory and resistance, enabling individuals to navigate the dislocation and trauma caused by war. Through a synthesis of historical realities and imaginative storytelling, the paper demonstrates how recontextualized urban spaces transcend immediate conflict, preserving cultural and individual identities in times of upheaval. It further examines the emergence of natural and mythical metaphors for articulating inherent human qualities – resilience and hope. These metaphors reflect the cyclical processes of destruction and regeneration, highlighting the enduring human capacity to adapt and resist.

By focusing on the narratives of children in war zones, the study reveals their role as active agents of meaning-making. Their stories illuminate the universal struggle to reclaim identity within disrupted environments, bridging personal trauma with broader socio-political realities. The study contributes to narratology, urban studies, and trauma studies by advancing an understanding of how autobiographical narratives reconstruct the relationship between urban spaces and identity formation. It affirms storytelling as a vital mechanism for resilience, continuity, and resistance in the aftermath of war, ensuring the enduring essence of cities and their people.

*Keywords:* Storytelling, cities, identity formation, myths and metaphors, trauma, resilience

## 1. Introduction

Shakespeare in his tragic drama *Coriolanus* (1628), based on the life of the legendary Roman leader Gnaeus Marcius Coriolanus declared “what is the city but the people?” in Act 3, Scene 1. The observation, made nearly four centuries ago, retains its profound relevance even today, encapsulating the intrinsic connection between humanity and its urban environments. Cities or the metropolis<sup>1</sup>, as centers of habitation, represent humankind’s aspiration for progress and innovation, offering state-of-the-art facilities and amenities. Yet, as Aristotle aptly proclaimed, humans are inherently social and political beings, and cities extend beyond mere physical constructs to become extensions of their inhabitant’s identities. Cities encapsulate social, political, and cultural histories, with their names becoming synonymous with the collective experiences they embody – both the triumphs and the tragedies of their citizens.

Cities are a dual perfunctory – determining and coming to be defined by the cultural compass and fate of their citizens. They become inseparable from the personal and the national destiny. They emerge as a living organism and a metaphoric character in and for the lives of their citizens, performing varied functions for their occupants by offering them places of recreation, worship, organize and gather in communities to participate in political, religious and cultural activities, celebrate and mourn the achievements and passing of their compatriots, respectively. They also witness a thousand life-stories unfolding within their borders and stories that are shaped by the cities themselves. They carry hopes and aspirations of their past citizens into an evolving present, bringing more character to the boundless possibilities in the maze of their columns, bridges, and lanes. The association individuals form with their cities – through birth, education, work, or life milestones – renders these spaces integral to their personal and collective identities.

With all the promises of hope, progress, prosperity, and scientific achievements to propel the human kind to its greatness, cities simultaneously are a symbol of human suffering, immortality, corruption, greed, decadence, and decay. Beneath the façade of opulence, cities often conceal the grim realities of crime, injustice, mystery, chaos, confusion, and gross poverty. This paradoxical nature of cities with both glory and gore aesthetic, has long inspired writers and poets, who weave urban spaces into the fabric of their narratives, rendering cities as pivotal characters in both fictional and non-fictional works. Throughout history, wars have consistently marred cities, driven by disputes and the pursuit of power. These conflicts, romanticized and documented by poets and writers, often resulted in the plundering and devastation of urban landscapes. With advancements in modern warfare and the demarcation of borders segregating nations, wars began to be fought by soldiers near and on the borders defending their respective nations and civilian populations.

Since World War II, wars came straight to cities again with the Germans using aircrafts to bomb cities in order to bring them under the Nazi rule. Marjorie Ann Watts chronicles her British life before and during World War II and how it changes with the German air raids on Britain in *Slideshow: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (2014). The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the USA which brought the Second World war to an end further jeopardized the civilian life and left them exposed and reeling under the burdens of war. These events not only inflicted widespread destruction but also left lasting psychological scars on civilian populations. In the postwar era, technological advancements in weaponry have exacerbated urban vulnerabilities, with cities becoming theatres of modern conflicts under the pretense of combating terrorism.

The destruction of cities during wars erodes cultural and historical sites that serve as repositories of collective memory. The physical spaces of cities set in mortar and concrete extol an emotional and rhythmic response from children as well who learn to synthesis and exercise their identities through the medium of cities. The obliteration of public spaces, coupled with displacement and militarization disrupts the identity formation for children growing up in war zones by depriving them of familiar environments critical to their sense of belonging. They lose access to their homes beyond the confines of their homes in more than one way – lack of public spaces taken over by prevailing armies and citizens, an argument supported by settler colonies in Palestine, a vigilant state monitoring civilian movement at all times as it happens in Kashmir, forced displacement of civilians from cities they have known as homes such as during Partition of the Indian sub-continent, or urban annihilation in conflicts such as those in Sarajevo and Phnom Penh, intensifying their trauma.

The paper explores the transformation of cities – both as physical entities and as metaphoric characters into symbols of resilience and loss. It studies the significance of cities in the lives of children growing up in war zones by analyzing the deployed myths, fantasies, and metaphors to reconstruct their sense of belonging amidst chaos. Through these reimaginations, the paper highlights how constructed autobiographical narratives navigate disrupted realities and create new frameworks for identity and continuity in the aftermath of destruction.

## 2. Visual and Metaphoric Reimaginings of Conflict Zones

The collective history of the cities and their people shape individual identities and provide a safety net to fall back on to trace the history and the sociological leanings of one's life, which goes adrift during war. The dissociation resulting from the loss of familiar places impacts the process of identity making in the young impressionable minds affected by war. The memory making process aids the preservation of familiarity. Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory* (1992) says

we preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated. But because these memories are repetitions, because they are successively engaged in very different systems of notions, at different periods of our lives, they have lost the form and the appearance they once had (47).

These repetitions of memories through different forms and mediums help the young to understand the conflict or the war they are subjected to and provide a more comprehensive view through autobiographies countering the reflective gaze of the outside world. John Ma in 2009 begins his essay *The City as Memory* with a scathing question, "How do you remember who you are – rather than exist as a collection of contingent moments and *ad hoc* reactions" (248)? He takes this question beyond the confines of the individual "whose consciousness gives the illusion of continuity" (248) and makes this an urgency for the collective memory of the group. But this illusionary bubble of continuity is suspended in times of war when the collective memory of the group is disrupted by overwhelming violent and powerful forces.

The construct of stories involving the origin narratives and myths related to particular places and events are extrapolated and disseminated by elders, who have retired from active social life and are entrusted by the society to function as repositories and perform the act of recollection with other adults through multiple repetitions. The foundational stories of people of a city act as an extended human family and the places of the city offer a way of perpetuating identity. These places which are human constructs are not simply "(about) men (and women), but also about a place" (248), which themselves make memory affirming their past acting in the present to pass it on to the future. Malik Sajad in *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015) digs deep into the history of the Valley to learn about the issues plaguing the Valley in recent times.

As a child scared to lose his father and his eldest brother, Bilal, in identification parades or cross-firing, Munnu develops a personal shield and takes refuge in his drawings. He carves out sketches on notebooks and chalks to overcome his perennial anxiety and fear. As he learns to draw from his father, his interest in drawing develops to reflect and draw attention on problems concerning and affecting the local Kashmiris. As he continues to draw and eventually publish his cartoons in the local daily, Greater Kashmir, he reaches a creative impasse and struggles to contribute to the editorial column, Inside Out. To overcome the challenge, his brother advises him to read the newspaper daily to look for potential news articles and issues he can contribute with the help of his drawings.

Munnu takes his brother's advice and starts participating actively in the local and international news to keep himself abreast of the happenings around the world. At the risk of getting redundant, he starts a self-dialogue and meets Maulvi Sahab, who directs him and asks him not to be afraid of asking difficult questions and reprimanding different political parties for their self-interests. Munnu realizes he doesn't know the history of the Valley and that may hamper his cartoons (Sajad, 177). During the same time, he visits Kathmandu and meets a delegation of writers and cartoonists who question his politics and lack of knowledge in grasping the political situation of Kashmir.

Munnu decides to learn about Kashmir to overcome his Dunning-Kruger syndrome<sup>2</sup> using a shortcut and starts attending writers' workshops, interviews locals, musicians, resistance leaders, Kashmiri Pundits, poets, historians, and an ex-militant, who advises him with real facts and asks him to read the history on his own (Sajad, 195) (Figure 1) to understand the socio-economic, political, and historical challenges and for better contextualization of Kashmir politics, how it has affected and

continues to affect generations. The reader then undertakes the educational journey in the historical depths of the Valley along with Munnu, the cartoonist, halfway through the book in the chapter titled “Footnotes” (197–211).



**Figure 1.** Munnu seeks help from various people to understand the history of Kashmir and is advised by an ex-militant to learn about the complex and multi-layered history of the land himself.

Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 195.

Malik invests in full page length panels in narrating the history of the Valley while educating the reader along with the naïvete of Munnu. The chapter titled “Footnotes” (197) begins with a panel dissecting the Valley in two parts with barbed wires, army check points, and national flags of India and Pakistan conferring the two sides, respectively, against a darkened background (Figure 2). In the subsequent pages, Sajad delves into the history of the Valley starting from ancient times and uses local lores and mythology to explain the Valley’s genesis. He starts with the most common myth explaining the evolution of Kashmir – the Valley being a high altitude lake called Satisar in which lived the demon Jaladhabhava, who caused distress to the locals and was indestructible while living inside the water. According to Hindu mythology, the great sage Kashayapa heard of the demon from his son Nila, who lived in the city and sought divine help to bring relief to the locals. On the orders of Lord Brahma, all gods took positions in the mountains and Lord Vishnu called upon his brother Balabhadra to drain out the lake, which he did by breaching Baramulla. The water receded and Jaladhabhava was slain by the disc of Lord Vishnu. The land came to be known as Kashmir after Sage Kashyapa (Prashar, 2573) (Figure 3).

Kashmir known for its cosmopolitan nature boasts of several origin myths in different religious and cultural backgrounds. In order to understand the complete history of the Valley, Sajad narrates all the myths to his readers as well. The common demon remains the same but the deity to destroy it and bring peace upon the Valley to make it habitable for its occupants changes. In the Buddhist version of the myth, the dragon in the lake was impressed by the meditative powers of the monk and gave him residence inside the lake but the monk deceived it and continued to grow in size till it dried the lake and the demon was pushed away (Sajad, 199) (Figure 4). Sajad draws the monks in human form but exploits the anthromorphized hanguls to depict the Kashmiri people even in the origin myths. The city, free from the demonised powers controlling it, becomes a metaphor of subjugation, which awaits a miracle or a person of godly nature to rescue it from its clutches.

Michalle Gal in *Visual Metaphors and Aesthetics* (2022) on the usage and deployment of metaphors, insists

metaphor is a medium – one cannot stress this enough – a structure, a composition, an end product or artifact. A metaphor is actually the newly rearranged target that becomes a member, a real-albeit-peripheral member, of a group. It gains properties, real properties, from the source, and thereby gains emergent properties from the amalgamation of the source properties with their compositional context (3).

The employment of visual metaphors in the form of hanguls to impress upon the readers the centuries of tyranny Kashmiris have lived under is further explicated when Kashmir becomes an important city on the Silk route, where learned men and travelers are again depicted in human form and the hanguls continue representing the local people.

After establishing Kashmir and its strategic position on the Silk Route with growing art, craft, literary traditions, and philosophies, Sajad jumps to the annexation of Kashmir by the Mughals, Afghans, and then the Sikhs (Sajad, 200 – 201) (Figures 5 and 6, respectively). Taking a leap from ancient and medieval histories of colonization, Sajad then depicts the modern colonization efforts by the British who defeated the Sikhs. Finding the Valley inhospitable due to its geographical location, the British sold the Muslim dominated Valley to a Hindu Dogra ruler under the Treaty of Amritsar, 1846<sup>3</sup> (202) (Figure 7). All throughout its tumultuous history, the locals are represented as hanguls, which echoes Italo's sentiment, "memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist" (16) and impresses upon Munnu, the protagonist and by extension the reader of *Munnu* (2015), centuries of defeat, subjugation, trampling of the locals by the powerful elite, and the existence of Kashmir as a large strategic city on the crossroads of ancient heritage and modern warfare inflicted upon it.

The Dogra rule proved to be the most tyrannical and exploitative – taxing the locals relentlessly and killing dissent in all its forms. The Partition of British India with the creation of two nations – India and Pakistan, further sidelined Kashmiris and no regard was paid to the Kashmiri Memorandum. The Kashmiris rallied and rebelled to demand freedom from centuries of foreign rule and were backed by Pakistani insurgents in their rebellion against the Dogra rule in 1947, immediately after dissolution of the British colony. The scared Maharaja sought refuge from the Indian government who agreed to help on the condition of Kashmir's ascension to India and the Indian armed forces landed in Kashmir on 26 October 1947 (Behera, 26). Kashmir, thus became a battleground of the two newly created nations and the United Nations created a ceasefire line, which was renamed as the Line of Control in 1972, after a peaceful referendum was failed sidelining the wishes of the locals, once again.

The failure to introduce peaceful elections and referendum gave rise to local dissent and various factions adopted violent measures to achieve their purposes. The rigging of the elections further dented the faith of the Kashmiri people in the Indian government and many political and non-political parties arose to demand the freedom of Kashmir. The rebellion and dissent was brutally crushed and an army rule was imposed in Kashmir under which the Kashmiris since then have lived and lost access of their public spaces. Despite the numerous challenges, Kashmiris have persevered with patience and resilience, reflected in the art forms, which speaks voluminously of the local flora and fauna. Sajad employs the hangul, a unique subspecies of the Asian red deer, scientifically known as *Cervus hanglu hanglu*, as a metaphor to showcase the locals, taking inspiration from Kashmir's rich biodiversity. Listed as Critically Endangered in IUCN'S Red Data Book and placed under the Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, hanguls are on the brink of extinction due to encroachment of forest lands for agriculture, military embankments, modernization and development of cities (Pawar).

The employment of a critically endangered local animal further adds meaning to the existing emblem of disproportionate representation and lack of opportunities for the people of the Valley and becomes a scathing critique of the policies of the nations and the conversion of a cosmopolitan rich space into a war territory. The anthromorphosized depiction of humans, having originated in the external space still deeply rooted within the landscape of the Valley, is in constant tussle with the





**Figure 2.** Sajad divides the land of Kashmir claimed by India and Pakistan, respectively, with barbed wires and army checkpoints on both the sides. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 197.



**Figure 3.** Munnu explains the Hindu myth of the evolution of Kashmir where Sage Kashyapa defeats the water demon. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 198.





**Figure 6.** The conquests of Mughals, Afghans, and the Sikhs fighting for Kashmir and decimating the local Kashmiris on their land. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 201.



**Figure 7.** The British army defeated the Sikhs and after finding the land inhospitable sold it to Gulab Singh who helped the British during the war. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 202.



internal factions trying to overcome the external forces of power and violence depicted through human forms and occasionally as bears<sup>4</sup> (Figure 8), becomes a metaphoric language and reiterates, “metaphors reconstruct thoughts to be deep and pictures to be expressive. They reconstruct emotions to be stormy, allow willows to weep and people to flourish. They rearrange theories to be buildings. They enable relationships to be at crossroads, and later at a dead-end” (Gal, 4).



**Figure 8.** As his cartoon for the editorial titled *Inside Out* at the daily *Greater Kashmir*, Munnu draws a cartoon portraying the Indian Army as bear safeguarding the roads before the Republic Day of India. He emphasizes the Darwinian theory but the policemen usually portrayed as humans take the form of a giant fearsome bear ready to pounce on Kashmiris depicted as hanguls. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu*:

*A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 166.

### 3. Navigating Childhood by Constructing Historical Fantasies

George Perec in *W or the Memory of Childhood* (2011) sums up his past or a historical mooring of his present in a single sentence – “I have no childhood memories” and “History with a capital H, had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps” (6). Orphaned during the Second World War after losing his father on the frontlines fighting for France and his mother in one of the death camps orchestrated and run by the Nazis, he was adopted and raised by his paternal aunt and her family. He tries to fill the blankness of his past with a few photographs he has of his parents and colors the photographs with stories inspired from fantasies he reads in the books. His mother at the height of the war sent him away with the Red Cross under the pretense of injury to his arm, which is wrapped in a sling. The same incident has a different memory with his aunt asserting that the arm wasn’t in a sling and that he was being evacuated by the Red Cross as “a son of father deceased”, “a war orphan” (55).

Perec performs the act of constructing and reconstructing his memories through photographs, anecdotes, experiences, and talking with his aunt, while he continues growing up in different cities. After enlistment in the army as a parachutist, he understands the triple theme that runs in his memory of being evacuated at the height of the war and proclaims, "I was plunged into nothingness; all the threads were broken; I fell, on my own, without any support. The parachute opened. The canopy unfurled, a fragile and firm suspense before the controlled descent" (55). When as an adult, he starts understanding and putting historical events into perspective in conjunction with his own life, he realises there was "no beginning, no end. There was no past, and for many years there was no future either; things simply went on" (69). The memories are unhinged without any anchor as he moves from one city to another, from one boarding house to another, from one relative's family to another's, and has no inkling of his mother's family or history and only has the fortune to learn about his father from his paternal aunt and grandmother.

In the absence of memories of his distraught and dislocated childhood marred by war, Perec tries developing a story but later forgets about it. A few years later, he revisits the story and remembers "it was called *W* and that it was, in a way, if not *the* story of my childhood, then at least *a* story of my childhood" (6) (*italics added*). The choice of the article summarizes the outcome of his life in the midst of a war and it finds its parallel with the city of *W* and the community it hosts on the tiny island off Tierra del Fuego, where the Olympic rules and motto – *Fortius Altius Citius* govern the daily life of its inhabitants. *W*, Perec says, "is a land where Sport is king, a nation of athletes where Sport and life unite in a single magnificent effort" and that "life, here, is lived for the greater glory of the Body" and the sport fashions social relations and individual aspirations (67).

Perec creates and traces the history of *W* for its reader and proclaims it was "inhabited when it was colonised, at the end of the nineteenth century, by the group whose descendants constitute the entire population of the island" and it "did not appear at all or featured only as a vague and nameless blob with scarcely determined distinctions between land and sea" (66). Perec compares the occupation of the island and the Olympic rules governing the society on the island with the concentration camps during Nazi Germany and World War II, which brought destruction and trauma to the Jewish citizens who were ordered to wear a yellow star and then systematically erased, and therefore for Perec, "*W* is no more like my Olympic fantasy than that Olympic fantasy was like my childhood" (7).

Perec registers an overwhelming loss of a private public physical space and his parents, which uprooted him from his historical roots and the means to connect with it, with an exception of tracing his paternal family name to Peretz, which is also in the Bible. He enlists the meaning of the name in different languages and states how that "Peretzes like to think they are descended from Spanish Jews exiled by the Inquisition, whose migrations can be traced to Provence (Peiresc), then to the Papal States, and finally to central Europe, principally Poland and secondarily Romania and Bulgaria" (35–36). He mentions the prominent ancestor in the family – Polish Yiddish writer Isaac Leib Peretz and then his grandfather, David Peretz who lived in Lubartow and had three children in the course of 13 years, that is, during the births of his three children – Esther Chaja Perec, Eliezer Peretz, and Icek Judko Perec, Lubartow was part of Russia, then Poland, and then Russia again, which explains the difference in the spellings of their names – Perec in Polish and Peretz in Russian. In the subsequent years, his father might have been called Andre by his colleagues, according to the hazy memories of Perec's aunt and Perec believes his father *could* have adopted the name to conceal his identity between 1940–1945 and claimed to have come from Brittany (36) (*italics added*).

The concealment and appropriation of names to disguise their identities in the midst of war further dents the historical identity roots one can unravel to feel familiar at a place. These overwhelming losses due to the war is compensated by a fictional fantasy city *W* on the island of Tierra del Fuego, which the hero travels to with the aim of unraveling the truth about a missing person whose identity he had assumed to evade the army life he had abandoned. The fantasy world constructed in a city on an isolated island is replete with violence and echoes the survival of the fittest sentiment, which nevertheless results in death. Perec takes the reader on a journey of the hero



constructing the world of **W** and the places he had inhabited till then, which are all called with single alphabets of the Roman script – he was living in **H** for three years, his mother had died in **D** in Bavaria, the insurance agent Otto Apfelstahl wanted to meet him in **K**.

Perec weaves the story of **W** with his life during the Second World War and unravels the naming of the city on a small island when his memories of a life he knew amongst his aunts and cousins start to take concrete form and he pieces together the tragedies that have befallen upon his name and family. Panged by the woes of an autobiographer to give an authentic shape to his memories he unearths the actual meanings of certain words which until the time of writing he had only assumed. Living in the vacationing home of his aunt, of which by his own admission he has no concrete memories, he recalls a farm across the house, which later turned into a factory manufacturing plastic products. He recalls an old man who sawed wood “in the shape of an **X** (called a ‘Saint Andrew’s Cross’ in French), connected by a perpendicular crossbar, the whole device being called, quite simply, an **x**” (Perec, 76). This **X** creates a world of memories for Perec which he dissects, reimagines, and reinvents in several different ways through mathematical approaches, borrowing from experts in neurophysiology and geometry to reach a conclusion

the basic figure is the double **V**, and whose complex convolutions trace out the major symbols of the story of my childhood: two of **V**s joined tip to tip make the shape of an **X**; by extending the branches of the **X** by perpendicular segments of equal length, you obtain a swastika (卐), which itself can be easily decomposed, by a rotation of 90 degrees of one of its *S* segments on its lower arm, into the sign *SS*; placing two pairs of **V**s head to tail produces a figure (**XX**) whose branches only need to be joined horizontally to make a star of David (☆) (77).

Perec deduces the signs which governed the non-historicity and lack of childhood experiences in a happy family sheltered by his parents from a single alphabet to the historical usage of signs and the meanings that have been associated with them. He begins his analysis of the letter **V**, which when combined with another **V** makes a **W**, the name he accords to his childhood fantasy city in a fictional world he tried to create and ends with The Star of David. It is in the shape of a hexagram, a compound of two equilateral triangles and generally recognized as a symbol of both Jewish identity and Judaism. Derived from the seal of Solomon, it was used for decorative and mystical purposes before it became representative of Zionism after being chosen as the central symbol for a Jewish national flag at the First Zionist Congress held in 1897<sup>5</sup>. During Holocaust, the symbol took a more gruesome meaning when it became mandatory for Jews over six years of age to wear the badge of the Star of David in yellow color to distinguish them in public spaces and failure to compliance was severely punished.

Analyzing the letter **W**, which contains in itself two **V**s, he exemplifies the double world inhabiting the city of **W** and in the Nazi controlled Europe. Swastika, which came to symbolize the Nazi party and its ideology of racial purity is also derived from twisting and designing the same letter which created **W** and it also creates the *SS*, which is tasked with enacting the policies of the Nazi party. Adolf Hitler as the leader of the Nazi party established the *SS* – the Schutzstaffel; Protection Squadrons in 1925, with the aim of protecting himself and other Nazi leaders and speakers. Himmler became the commander of the *SS* in January 1929 and took direct orders from Hitler. He transformed the *SS* into an elite unit composed of the best racially pure German officers, whose aim was to ensure racial purity by “solving” the Jewish Question by conceiving and implementing plans to restructure the ethnic composition of eastern Europe and the occupied Soviet Union, by annihilating the European Jews in the concentration camps, which later came to be known as the Holocaust (Museum).

#### 4. Symbolism and Historical Resonance in Childhood Narratives

Swastika is derived from the Sanskrit *svastika*, meaning “conducive to well-being. It was a favorite symbol on ancient Mesopotamian coinage. In Scandinavia, the left-hand swastika was the sign for

the god Thor's hammer" (Britannica). It also appeared in early Christian and Byzantine art and it was also found in South and Central America (the Maya) and in the North America (among the Navajo). In India, the swastika is revered by Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists, featuring on account books, thresholds, doors, and offerings. It symbolises "four possible places of rebirth – in the animal or plant world, in hell, on Earth, or in the spirit world" (Britannica) in the Jain tradition and is also an emblem of the seventh Tirthanakara, Suparshvanatha. From its earliest conceptions, Swastika was used as a metaphor to symbolise positivity, health, and fertility in all the cultures, but the work of "European linguists and other scholars, was taken by racist groups for whom the swastika was a symbol of 'Aryan identity' and German nationalist pride" (Museum, The History of the Swastika) and its subsequent adoption by Adolf Hitler in 1920 as a German national symbol and as the central element in the party flag of the National Socialist Party, or the Nazi Party, forever changed the connotations associated with the symbol (Hogeback).

The symbol to extol pride in the hearts of Germans also became symbolic of fear and terror among the Jews and other enemies of the Nazi Germany. The color scheme of the flag featuring red, white, and black "intentionally drew on the colors of the flag of Imperial Germany (1871–1918), which still resonated with many Germans who rejected democracy and the Weimar Republic" (Britannica). With the defeat of Nazism, the meaning of the swastika changed and is today stigmatised as a symbol of hatred and racial bias with its usage banned in Europe. It is frequently used by racist groups and by rebels challenging the established status-quo. Sajad in *Munnu* (2015) demonstrates the symbol of swastika was also used by the Indian Army to mark the houses they had checked during lockdowns and identification parades.

The atmosphere of fear prevailed in the city whenever these crackdowns were announced and houses were searched for alleged terrorists hiding in the homes of local Kashmiris. Munnu's family's fear sprouted from the fact that their house did not come under the radar of the army and was left unchecked unintentionally excusing Munnu's father and brother to join the identification parades. Assuming the worst, if the army figured out later that their house was not searched and the men did not join the parade or if their neighbour or anyone else reported their absence, Munnu's sister, Shahnaz drew a swastika to hide their absence from the parade and to console Munnu, "don't worry, Munnu. If they catch us, we'll say this mark is from the previous crackdown" (Sajad, 13) (Figure 9).

The use of swastika by the military forces in Kashmir reverberates the German supremacist ideology with the Indian religious and communalist doctrines. With the exodus of the Kashmiri Pundits from the Valley, the segregation of the Muslim minority in the Indian political and public spaces, rigging of the Jammu and Kashmir State elections by the Indira Gandhi government at the Centre, and constant demands of freedom from the Kashmiris themselves strengthened the ideology of hatred and otherness. Riots accompanied and followed by the Partition of India, wars with Pakistan, and the aggressive cultural nationalism led by the idea of saffronization invoking myths of past Hindu glory coupled with strong xenophobic sentiments, replenished with the social middle classes at the nexus of the debate contributed immensely in the politics of Kashmir, which was tabled and fought from the Hindi heartland.

Tapan Raychaudhuri examines the Hindutva politics and the factors leading to its meteoric rise in the newly created nation-state – India, and summarizes cautiously in 2000, "the Swastika painted straight in bright vermilion is a familiar symbol of bliss and well-being in every Hindu home. Tilted slightly to the right, it acquired sinister meaning on the world scene. A struggle is now in India to prevent the threat of such a tilt" (278) after the Indian Army under the powers given to it under the AFSPA Act<sup>6</sup> had already used it in a state kept under constant surveillance in the early years of insurgency. Coincidentally, the exodus of the Kashmiri Pundits, demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992 led by the activists of Vishva Hindu Parishad and allied organizations, religious riots in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Delhi targeting Muslim neighbourhoods aligned with the early phases of insurgency and Army rule in Kashmir.

The re-use of Swastika during the Nazi propaganda tumbling the centuries old positive symbolism associated with it and its re-emergence sporadically by xenophobic and rebellious groups asserts that symbols can attain and achieve meaning differently and can retain those through centuries often attesting their dominance repeatedly. Symbols can be developed from the city's political consensus as well which Sajad Malik illustrates by deploying an environmentally guided figurative metaphor of the Kashmir hangul, struggling to survive encroachment to its habitat suggesting the crunching space of social, political, and cultural space of the Kashmiris in the Valley. The juxtaposition of hangul symbolizes resilience amidst marginalization under the appropriation of the swastika by military forces echoing its Nazi-era connotations of surveillance and dehumanization.



**Figure 9.** Munnu's sister draws a swastika on the gate of their home following the routine of the Indian Army who would draw the symbol on the gates of homes they had checked. Munnu's sister's drawing quelled Munnu's fears for some time and safeguarded their home initially from the army.

Source: Maik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 13.

## 5. Nature-inspired Metaphors as Symbols of Hope and Resilience

Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) relies on black and white images to depict the childhood of Marji in Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War that followed. The dual colors follow the emotional state of Marji paralleling the brewing turmoil in the country. The panels and the backgrounds get darker as political situations tense and brighten when Marji feels safe in the presence of her family and friends. The simple style of drawing, however, is deceptive, as many panels contain intertextual allusions or other experiences that are more mature than that of the young girl depicted in the two volumes. The protagonist's confusions, difficulties, and mental turmoil are signaled both verbally and visually through the medium of graphic narrative. The ambiguity of mental processing of the events originates from the non-realist, cartoony style that eschews perspectival construction in favor of two-dimensional surface impressions.



**Figure 10.** Satrapi employs the metaphor of a snake to depict the impending doom, which Marji fears with a skeptical look on her face contrasting her parents' comfort, happiness, and celebratory mood, after the expulsion of the Shah from Iran. Source: Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Pantheon Books, United State of America, 2003, 43.

Satrapi uses visual metaphor and symbolism to indicate an aspectuality that is not easily attributable to a specific character. For instance, in a panel where the small family of three – Satrapi and her parents indulge in a political discussion about the situation in Iran after the Shah has left and the fundamentalists are yet to take power. As the discussion progresses, Satrapi draws a panel in which the family is framed by a highly stylized symbol of the devil in the shape of a snake. This symbol is in complete contrast to her mother's assertion in a speech balloon, "now that the devil has left" (43), referring to the Shah. Marji's skeptical look conveys otherwise, the experiencing-I takes up an aspectual vantage point of the political discussion between her parents, lending her a retrospective analysis of the political situation, making her a narrating-I, who is mature, experienced, knowledgeable, and aware of the unfolding of the political situations and its history. Hence, as a character-bound focalization, the snake expresses the young girl's lingering doubt as to whether the devil has really left (Figure 10).

The metaphor of the snake about to bite itself is completed by Malik Sajad in *Munnu*. Satrapi reflects on the situation when the Shah has left and the fundamentalists have still not risen to power but with time as the ambiguous torch passes to Malik, the fundamentalists had not only taken power in Iran but were also rising in Kashmir. As Munnu, the protagonist, tries to overcome his dryspell of making cartoons for the Greater Kashmir daily and after exhausting ideas from his scrapbook turns his attention to the Iran-Iraq war, which was slowly becoming relevant in the politics of Kashmir as well, the snake bites its tail to feed its ambiguity of life and death. Sajad expresses his discontent and frustration for words like "peace" and "war" and draws a snake against the camouflaging environment of leaves and greenery devouring itself. It is a stand-alone panel deflecting away from Munnu's struggle of coming up with a relevant cartoon for the daily and highlights the pain of all the Kashmiris who are fed the false narrative of peace in a state rife with conflict and constant army vigilance.

Snakes are enigmatic living beings symbolizing evil and destruction while also epitomizing fertility and renewal in various cultures and mythologies. It is particularly true for Persian and Kashmiri mythology where the snakes have been revered as protective dieties but also used to instil fear of the



devil<sup>7</sup>. Myths and history form a dual relationship feeding into each other through the experiences of the human kind. Satrapi and Sajad explore the primary function of myths – their ability to explore and explain situations, offering an escape and building resilience in difficult times and telling stories of coming into existence; and substantiate William Bascom’s thesis “myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their characters are not usually human beings, but they often have human attributes. Myths account for the origin of the world, of mankind, of death, or for characteristics of birds, animals, geographical features, and the phenomena of nature” (4).

Sajad finds inspiration in nature again when he depicts the hollowness the word “peace” offers not only in the context of Kashmir but also Iraq, while the city and the country are struggling with “war.” By employing the ouroboros – a circular symbol in the form of a snake or a dragon, which is devouring its own tail, Sajad and Satrapi represent the eternal cycle of destruction and rebirth as the by-products of war and peace (Sajad, 173; Satrapi, 43) (Figures 10 and 11), which continually feed into each other and on the lives of the civilians, and extend the metaphor for life – implying death and birth in a continuous cycle through various seasons.



**Figure 11.** Sajad expresses his pent-up frustration with the words “peace” and “war” the people of the Valley have been grappling with by employing the metaphor of an ouroboros, symbolizing destruction and regeneration simultaneously. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 173.

Satrapi and Sajad exemplify how visual media amplifies the emotional resonance of autobiographical narratives by creating stylistic and metaphoric characters. They rely on historical knowledge systems and imaginative faculties of the reader to grasp the meaning of the metaphors employed in recontextualizing the cities, signifying that visual culture has been part of human civilization since ages and various records and cave paintings testify to the claim of the immense role they have played in our lives. The forms of visuals have been inspired by their environments and can be derived from various sources such as

those of smiles, of houses, of trees, of frustration or anger, which emoji (both static and animated) manifest so well. They could be particular, the identity of which is not gained by a membership in a group, such as the forms of specific monuments, of a personal piece of jewelry to cloth or one’s grandmother’s tea set. Visual forms are carried through the generations, cherished, quoted, and alluded to. They are reused, they impart pleasure and comfort, they are borrowed or reproduced, they build cultures tier above tier, they arrange thoughts, ideas, and ideologies and they furnish our ontological sphere. *Visuality is in our nature. Visuality is our nature* (Gall, 14) (italics original).



## 6. Conclusion

The paper studies the intricate relationship between children, urban environments, and the narratives they construct in the face of war. The dynamic entity of cities – shaping and being shaped by inhabitants, are employed as metaphoric characters of resilience, identity, and collective memory. Through the examination of *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, *Persepolis*, and *W or the Memory of Childhood*, it becomes evident that war disrupts urban spaces and displaces people uprooting them from their traditional communities. The use of visual and symbolic elements – the endangered hangul by Sajad, black and white imagery by Satrapi, and layered use of metaphors by Perec offer distinctive reconstruction of fragmented realities. The paper demonstrates how myths, metaphors, and fantasies enable children to reinterpret loss and cultivate a sense of continuity during tumultuous times.

The exploration of natural, seasonal, and mythical metaphors highlight the resilience inherent in human creativity. While wars devastate cities and leave lasting scars on people, these narratives affirm the enduring hope for renewal and regeneration. The historical realities are bridged with imaginative storytelling transcending immediate contexts and serve as poignant reminders of humanity's ability to adapt, resist, and remember. The narratives of children growing up in conflict and war zones illuminate the universal struggle to reclaim identity and meaning within disrupted urban landscapes. They remind us that in the shadows of destruction, the desire to preserve and resist persevere through storytelling and memory ensuring the essence of cities and the endurance of their people.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Metropolis is derived from Greek words meter and polis meaning mother and city, respectively. Historically, the word has been used to refer to the founding city-state in Ancient Greece and in modern terms, the word refers to urban areas comparatively more developed with more economic and lifestyle opportunities. Metropolis is usually a prototypical city on which other cities are visioned to be developed or modeled after.
- <sup>2</sup> The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias in which people with limited competence in a particular domain overestimate their abilities. It was described by David Dunning and Justin Kruger for the first time in 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> This was the second treaty of Amritsar, signed after the First Anglo-Sikh War between the British East India Company and Maharaja Gulab Singh Dogra. The treaty established the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under the suzerainty of the British Indian Empire.
- <sup>4</sup> Munnu, the budding cartoonist, draws the Indian army man as an overbearing, scary, and carnivorous predator preying on the local Kashmiri, himself, depicted as a hangul, to symbolize the tyranny and dehumanization of the Kashmiris. The cartoon represents the repression of the Kashmiris which increases in lieu of safety measures taken by the Indian government and the army during Republic Day celebrations in the country (Sajad, 166).
- <sup>5</sup> The Star of David in blue printed against a white background is the official flag of Israel today.
- <sup>6</sup> AFSPA stands for The Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, which was passed in September, 1990. If the governor of Jammu and Kashmir or the Central Government, is of the opinion that the whole or any part of the union territory (then state) is in such a disturbed and dangerous condition then this act can be imposed. According to Attar, writing in 2014 in *Jammu & Kashmir and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act*, “the Act has been in force since the last two decades without a lull in between. It has facilitated violations of human rights on account of several of its draconian provisions” (Rabbani).
- <sup>7</sup> Persian stories and legends such as The Zakhak Legend and the Two Intertwined Serpents, The Two-Headed Serpent of Mount Damavand, the Story of Rostam and Sohrab, The Serpent and the Simurgh, and

the Story of Ardashir I present snakes as evil, destructive, cunning, and contriving creatures. It is also depicted and associated with life, death, fertility, and rebirth, as it sheds its skin and becomes anew. It represents the dual nature of the world and acts as a constant reminder of the struggle between the good and the evil.

Snakes are an important symbol in Kashmiri folklore and mythology as well. The Valley is believed to be inhabited by a snake who was driven out by divine powers to facilitate human habitation, as Malik Sajad has shown in his memoir. The Legend of Heemal and Nagrai is another popular example, Kashmiris – Hindus and Muslims, alike, quote referring to their worship of the Nagas.

The symbol of snake also has a cross-cultural intertextual reference to the Genesis story in the Hebrew Bible and Zoroastrianism, the ancient dualistic Iranian religion, snakes as one of the animal species is associated with the evil Ahriman. The five Hadiths of the Sunnah also mention snakes as deadly enemies.

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# Reading Difference: What Comparative Literature Tells us of Plurality

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UMA MADHU & ANUPAMA KUTTIKAT

**Abstract:** With the American School's emphasis on interdisciplinarity at the expense of the text as an 'event' of encounter and the analytical predominance of categories such as anglophony, francophony, and 'Indian' writing in English continuing to exist owing to the privileging of universal categories of identity, literary analysis has been rendered external to the central concerns of the discipline. In this paper, we propose ways to position literary analysis as central to the comparative methodology through an analysis of practices of narrativization in select contemporary novels that destabilise categories of identification including Sarr's *The Most Secret Memory of Men*, Dany Laferrière's *I am a Japanese Writer*, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, and PF Mathews' *Chavunilam*. In this paper, we explore the possibility of a literary analytical methodology that is suited to the concerns of Comparative Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as a means to surmount the binaries between text/context, aesthetics/identity, east/west through an ethics of 'alterity', 'dialogue' and 'relationality' as fundamental to human existence and not mutually exclusive of each other. Through expanding and negotiating with the "literary", we suggest that the revival of the literary aesthetic is not separate from contextual concerns, but vitally capable of accommodating plurality through meaningful engagements with our 'others', and providing unique and indispensable perspectives.

**Keywords:** Comparative methodology, aesthetics, plurality, relationality, contemporary literature

The writer's word manifests the unknown and the strange. Didn't a writer say  
long ago "cease to think...now, dream".

– PF Mathews

## Introduction

In the ACLA State of the Discipline Report of 2004, Haun Saussy alludes to the "exquisite cadavers" of Comparative Literary methodology. As it stands now, "Our conclusions have become other people's assumptions" (3) even as it brings little by way of "tangible reward" to the discipline (4). Saussy's remark provokes us to introspect on the methodological debt of possibility owed to our discipline and therefore, our responsibility to revitalise our position with regard to the practice of 'doing' comparative literature.

In the light of the growing demand for interdisciplinary and purely sociological approaches to "studying" literature, there is an increasing disparagement of methodologies that involve "only reading artistic literature." What is the implication of such a turn away from literary analysis and its significance? Both Edward Said and Sthathis Gourgouris have critiqued this obsession by referring to it as a "cult of professional expertise" (Said 30). For Gourgouris, the "advent of interdisciplinarity" is an "indication of alleged undisciplinarity" (70). It also speaks to the abilities and inabilities of "selling humanities" (Fish) as "useful" with readily pragmatic "utilitarian" benefits and also of view-

ing literature and literary art in its own complex terms rather as a one-to-one reflection of a “study-able” social phenomenon. Prof. Sayeed in his essay, “A Note on Understanding” distinguishes between the *telos* in the Sciences and Humanities as attempts to seek ‘knowledge’ versus ‘understanding’. While truth, facts and figures are *known*, meaning is *understood* where meaning cannot be reduced to mere linguistic understanding because it is an experiential event (3–4).

The practices of “close reading” and “distant reading” have been understood as fundamental oppositions. They are placed as mutually exclusive positions; the “close reading” of the “practical” critics has been understood as belonging to the arsenal of the conservative comparatists and Moretti’s “distant reading” was the proposed alternative of the age of planetary cosmopolitan comparative literature. Both these strategies have since been identified as purposeful and yet inadequate. Perhaps, it is because we are called to return to the ‘pluralism’ that is at the heart of our discipline and that eschews binary categorisations and blanket universals. The site for this return, we argue, is in literature itself.

This paper argues that it is time for us to place literary analysis at the centre of comparative methodology in our efforts to understand the core values that bolster our discipline; those of ‘plurality’, ‘alterity’ and ‘relationality’ through a willing engagement with the ‘other’ without the hefty cost of reductionism.

### The ‘Literary’ as a Method of Re-invention

In a sweeping eschatological declaration on the “last gasp of a dying discipline”, Gayatri Spivak suggests that the discipline of Comparative Literature could easily be subsumed by other disciplines such as Cultural Studies and Area Studies. Ipshita Chanda rebuts this claim in her essay “Can the Non-Western Comparatist Speak?” when she suggests that Spivak’s problem is one of method and of garnering a method to navigate the dynamics of the Cold War and 9/11 in Western academia thereby leading to a crisis that does not clarify who has been dead and by whom (59).

With the American School’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity at the expense of the text as an ‘object’ of study, literary analysis has been rendered external to the central concerns of the discipline. While the text is undoubtedly and indisputably a cultural product, no cultural product is a mirror image of its culture just as all of us, every individual, is not a mere monolith of our shared social experiences. Questions of “authenticity” specifically those raised from “central” locations of culture and criticism often seek to participate in elaborate rituals of “authentication”, reproducing singular images of the *authentic*; a ‘canon’ of the authentic. “Speaking for the collective always means betraying individuals” (380) as Sarr rightly puts in his novel, *The Most Secret Memory of Men*.

Re-considering the text as an ‘event’ involves grappling with the unique ways in which literature processes, negotiates, arrives at, or departs from the circumstances of its production. This is particularly significant within a time where the literature being produced is, in fact, increasingly sophisticated and navigating multifaceted and uniquely challenging circumstances. The text is not an island unto itself but submerged within the multiplicity of dialogues. The challenge here is to prevent ourselves from confusing the text with one voice or one dialogue alone. Categories of identifying and micro-identifying literatures with specific regional, linguistic or thematic discourses may well be one of the many sources of that confusion. For instance, *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, a British Pakistani writer, stretches the form of the novel and the form of ‘narratives of belonging’ to accommodate for the chronic refugee crisis and the state of permanent transience. The novel drifts through simultaneities and incorporates elements of magical realism such that it begins to arrive at novel ways of existence within a world of transient belongings. The sophistication of form in Hamid’s writing and the *avant-garde* elements that invent a way of hopefulness in anticipations of catastrophe—do we place this narrative solely within the framework of the refugee, diaspora, or the immigrant? In a work where the place of origin is deliberately unnamed and the places of arrival are short-lived, placing it into any of these categories would be an act of algorithmic reduction. Rather,

it is prudent to interrogate through the text what categories are being disassembled and what spaces are being invented.

A similar case can be found in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*. This modern re-telling of Sophocles' *Antigone* explores the implications of the 21<sup>st</sup> century war on terror upon the lives of young Muslims, specifically those who are immigrants or citizens in the West. Shamsie reinvents *Antigone* on several levels: Sophocles' tragedy is novelised into the tragedy of far from exalted people but those who are not alien to fatal flaws including those of *hamartia*. The threefold narrative structure presented through the perspectives of Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz render the complications of hefty internalisations, the workings of secrecy and the price of openly declaring one's allegiance. This reinvention which still carries with it the transformed echoes of the original tragedy, does not allow us to engage with either text in isolation. It is a dialogue wherein each participant, including the reader, is transformed.

Instead of reducing the experiences of the individuals grappling with the same event, Shamsie utilises the novel as a form to show the heteroglossia of human experiences through characters who occupy different positions. If Isma's protectiveness over her family comes with the exhaustion of thankless endurance under several communities who all simultaneously denounce her, Aneeka declares herself her brother's keeper at the cost of her hopes, dreams, and life itself. Parvaiz himself is depicted as having been in search of the very belonging that had evaded his sister's; a search for the paternal homeland within which he too was betrayed. Even though all of them traverse through the same 'event,' the experience of this 'shared' event is not the same for all of them owing to their different positions in the society. The novel's analysis cannot be reduced to a homogenised reading of the diasporic experience. Rather, the 'plurality' inherent to the form and intensified by Shamsie through narrativization is the key to centering the co-existences that form the heart of the novel. Taking each character as a mere and isolated "product" of society takes away the contingencies of the individual characters, and therefore, of the literary event. It is reading that proposes micro-narratives and counter-narratives as against the grand narratives under which both literature and discipline could easily be subsumed. In order to excavate these micro-narratives from the literary texts, it is important that the literary method comes first and foremost in a comparatist's interaction with the text. Furthermore, a *transtextual* reading, rooted in the intensity of the dialogue that unfolds between *Antigone* and *Home Fire*, may yield meaning to the contextual particularities of both the texts, a "reversing" of the lens of stability that comparative literature affects (Hayes 13).

Prof. Amiya Dev in his "Towards Comparative Indian Literature" argues that 'Comparison is right for us because, one, we are multilingual, and two, we are Third World' (qtd. in Das 102). He advocates not for singular readings but rather for the framework and practice of "interliterariness" that foregrounds 'relationality' between literatures without reducing them to static and individual poles. It is notable that Prof. Dev developed this concept and its practice through his engagement with the undefinable category of Indian literature(s) which in threatening and promising to subsume every element of literature produced in this subcontinent still subsumes none of it. In his prolonged engagements with concepts of unity and diversity and the necessity of thematology, he says, "*Stoff* is interliterary in spirit; for being the abstract of an experience within one culture it is open to the literatures fed by that culture, and also to the literatures from other cultures if they are approachable in intercultural terms" (Dev 236). Taking an approach to these unforeseen avenues of literature informed by concepts such as "interliterariness" is in our view more productive than outdated and fossilised categorisations which at once isolates and homogenises the text and the reading experience.

The realities of forced migration, globalisation, and transnationalism are undoubtedly significant to our discipline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Saussy's report as far back as 2004 does affirm this calling for new avenues of analytical methods crucial to disciplinary adaptation. We would like to add that the response to these realities should not merely be a reinforcing of binaries between text/context and aesthetics/identity, which only serve to reify and fossilise one element of a binary as progressive and



the other as reactionary. On whichever side the coin falls, we forfeit our ability to comprehend 'plurality' and we deprive ourselves of our very real ability and potential to deftly navigate and even surmount such binaries. We live in the age of information where much of the world is readily narrativized in the best of ways and in the worst of ways. In such a context, it is futile for the literary analyst to singularly focus on where texts end and where contexts begin, whether art is for its own sake or the means to representation, whether the aesthetic or the resistive element should be prioritised in our reading particularly so when comparative literature compels us to ask—why not both? Why not all of it? It also invokes the ideas of 'difference', 'plurality' and 'relationality' as fundamental to human existence and not mutually exclusive of each other.

### Identity Studies and its Ramifications

Just as the text is indisputably a cultural product, the 'self' is also created out of our intersecting social realities and our intersecting identities. While there is a growing emphasis on identity as a category of analysis of literary texts, one must be cautious against not allowing it to become the sole category of analysis in the sense that the race, caste, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation of the author overshadows their creative text rather than allowing those intersections to freely illuminate the same. It is crucial that we understand identity as fluctuating and intersecting rather than as essentialised categories of experience. To that end, we must arrive at a pluralistic conception of identities hitherto understood as in essentialist terms. To be clear, we are not suggesting that analyses from the perspective of identity and social experience are obsolete or unnecessary. In fact, it is imperative that we interrogate received categories of literature, literary merit, and the parameters of the aesthetic in the light of multifaceted and plural identities with their oppressions and privileges. However, preconceived and monolithic conceptions of what makes up an identity and therefore, what the marginalised author is allowed to write and under what parameters they are enabled to be read have to be questioned. In as much as reading and writing are both approaches towards alterity, dialogising categories of identity may only elevate our ability to evade reductionism in this process.

Dany Laferrière in an interview denounces the "profiling" of authors according to the place of their origin and rejects all sorts of labels assigned to him such as 'francophony', 'Caribbean', 'exile', 'Quebecois', and 'immigrant'. He says, "Being labelled on something that is the focal point of freedom, to be labelled from creation is an absolutely incredible thing... That I am a migrant writer in anthologies kills me" (46) ... "How I hate that ugly word of *immigrant* – which is not even a French word. We say *immigrant*. Migrant literature? It's what? It looks like a horde of grasshoppers ready to devour you in their path. How not to be confused: what does it take to produce real literature, no ego or more ego? I feel like I have a star on my forehead every time people call me an immigrant writer" (Selao 241).

He critiques the categorisation of his novels as 'exile literature' and admits that success for him as a 'real writer' would be achieved when he is placed not only above negritude but also Creole or Francophone writing, exile literature or migrant writing, the last category being a coinage of "[re]searchers, academics, immigration agents and other head-shrinkers" (qtd. in Selao 240). This becomes an object of critique and ridicule in his novel, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, which was published in 2008, and translated into English as *I am a Japanese Writer* by David Homel in 2010. Laferrière says, "Being labeled on something that is the focal point of the freedom, to be labelled from creation is an absolutely incredible thing... That I am a migrant writer in anthologies kills me" (qtd. in Selao 240). The idea of the novel was conceived much earlier and in 2000, he had already declared his dream to write a book titled *Je suis un écrivain japonais* ("I am a Japanese Writer"). The novel goes to the extent of espousing that "For literature to really exist, the books would have to be anonymous. No ego, no more personal interventions" (Laferrière 51). It is tempting to assume that the 'problem' of difference may be 'solved' through the usage of profiling categories. We must reconceptualise understanding 'alterity' not as a means to towards universal answers but as a mode of

arriving at pluralistic co-existences. We suggest that literature has significantly more potential in this direction rather than as entirely mimetic depictions of the 'other.'

Likewise, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's novel *The Most Secret Memory of Men* challenges the idea that literature must be an act of 'committed writing' derived from the author's ideology. The character of Diégane (read as Sarr's alter-ego) makes no claims of literature being morally superior to politics and even goes to the extent of being ashamed to be honest with his lover, Aida— "What did the question of writing weigh against that of social suffering?... Literature before politics? Elimane in front of Fatima? So I lied to Aida" (323). Yet—through his writing—he insists on freeing literature from the domain of politics arguing that literature exists in a world of its own. A text is not and must not be taken as a mere reflection of every author's ideology. Rather, we must acknowledge that it demands its reader(s) to engage with the egocentric concerns depicted in the text to arrive at an understanding of the existential human condition and the ethics of engaging with the 'other' through literature's emphasis on accommodating 'difference' or 'alterity'. When Sarr was posed the question of whether a writer had to be committed, he replied, "Commitment is always the meeting of an author's temperament and a reader's sensitivity. Never absolute, it is always relative, fragmentary" (Juompan-Yakam). The novel also critiques the present predisposition of readers to reduce a literary text to being a mere assertion of the author's identity. In the novel, Diégane wonders:

"A writer who considers himself misunderstood, misread, humiliated, commented on by a prism other than literary, reduced to a skin, an origin, a religion, an identity, and who begins to kill the bad critics of his book out of revenge: it is pure comedy. Have things changed today? Are we talking about literature, aesthetic value, or are we talking about people, their tan, their voice, their age, their hair, their dog, their pussy hair, the decoration of their house, the color of their jacket? Are we talking about writing or identity, style or the media screens that dispense with having one, literary creation or the sensationalism of personality?" (282-83).

Sarr adopts a plurivocal strategy in his novel to demonstrate the escape of narrative from rigid identifications and the multiple truths or perspectives that literature offers through narrativisation of characters and events. He weaves the plot through a blend of narrative forms and points of view ranging from many first-person accounts, diary entries, epistolary to the protagonist referring to himself in the second-person "You" to ironically simulate not identification but difference and even a chapter in the third-person omniscient view to illuminate events unknown to the characters themselves. The "truth" here is not singular or objective but one that is contingent. The reflection of identification and "authenticity" as contingencies, fleeting "givens" from which we may read still allows them to not be taken as the full measure of the text. Living, writing, and articulating may be bound up with identity but the ways in which these bindings are twisted, tightened or broken apart could not be studied in a monologic reading or a uniform perspective. On the question of identity, we may be required to acknowledge the paucity of answers, we may even be required to be content with that.

The Malayalam authors, Johny Miranda and PF Mathews, who belong to the Latin Catholic or Cochin-Creole community, argue for reading novels for their aesthetics rather than for historical precision. Miranda says:

It is very difficult for a writer like me to make his presence felt in a literary culture that has always been dominated by Savarna voices. To make matters worse, when I am read, the focus is usually not on what I set out to achieve. It is a terrible dilemma. Does anyone ask M. T. Vasudevan Nair how he feels to be the voice of the Nair community? Why do people choose to focus on aesthetics when they discuss MT, and burden writers like me and Miranda with the responsibility of being some sort of cultural ambassadors for our community? (Thomas).

In his *Chavunilam*, Mathews complicates the concept of identity through the overlap of characters within space and time. The space of the *paazhnilam*, or the wasteland, upon which the lives of the characters play out in cycles of death and decay, acts as an aperture through which the dead encroach

upon the living. The dead are more than haunting within Mathews' setting. They predict, they endure, they dissect themselves into fragments and re-compose themselves into wholeness. They bury themselves within the living, directing them and devouring them in their dreams. *Paazhnilam* and the church act as fundamental pivots of identity, and as the realm of the wasteland encroaches upon that of the church, the distinctions between sin and virtue are hollowed, along with the distinctions within temporality and identity. Calling upon a readerly identification with the dead, Mathews disrupts the I-Other continuum between the reader, writer, and the text. The experience of mortality grips both the narrative and its audience in a series of extremely uneasy identifications. These identifications which are fragmented and fused together could only be comprehended through a pluralistic reading. There is no correspondence as much as there are fraught entanglements. The rejection of the church embodied within the character of Peru, as well as the ill-omened deaths that proliferate within the home, posit this space as oppositional to the identity created through the church, and warps the dimensions of community. Evoking the biblical passage of Jesus conducting "evil spirits" into the bodies of swine, the novel establishes a continuity with the parable. The spirits who were extinguished by the crazed swine within the waters reverberate and resurrect continually, never truly destroyed. The text then suggests the existence of residual and constantly resurrecting identities without any recourse to essential forms or figures. It also establishes a continuity with the other Wasteland, Eliot's declaration of the unravelling of modernity, each text imposed upon another, each meaning escaping the bounds of a single text.

The novel's narrative structure mirrors this overlap and intertextuality, as it does not register "breaks" in temporality, but posits the endurance of the past within the present and the future within memory as the "natural" extensions of time. This persistence is further echoed with the proliferation of stillbirths and early deaths within the novel; birth, the beginning of life, is already imbued with the death of another, and as such birth is rarely followed by a mooring of the self into identity. The lepers and the pigs, the women like Barbara who have been consigned to silence and namelessly buried within the wasteland, on the other hand, "return" in these fragments of death, "extending" beyond the bounds of their deprived identity. Thus, the nameless re-enact their deaths through the "as-yet-unnamed", positing identity as derived, not only from the trajectories of lineage and linearity, but rather, through repressed, fragmented residuals against which the "form", or in this case, the "house", has been constructed. The novel is thus populated by spectral presences, both living and dead, as the living glimpse fragments of themselves as the experience of death, and thereby identify further with the dead.

The novel begins and ends with a funeral; the "named" funeral of Eeshi begins the novel, or rather, the recognition of Eeshi's death becomes the conduit by which the dead floods back into the text, only to be ended with the funeral of the unnamed, stillborn child of his daughter, Anna. This funeral is then witnessed by Mathappan, who treads the ambivalent, transgressive space between the church and the wasteland, with a prophetic finality. As each birth is already haunted, lineages arrive already disrupted, and thus identity within this amalgam is perpetually left "unfinalized." "Incomplete", or "fragmentary" forms of identification may be read in terms of the instability that governs identity itself, the uncertainty which renews the meanings of community and belonging. Here, "identification" functions as a force of unexpected "sameness" along with unexpected "difference", and as such may only be read within as radically linked to 'others'. The concept of identity renders the boundaries between the 'self' and the 'other' murky, and no identification "sticks" to the skin of the characters inasmuch as the wasteland invokes a chaos that governs nothing but un-homed, tangled selves. As such, in the body of the text, there are differences, and violences, but there is no 'other.'

As we earlier suggested about the nature of binaries, the reification of binaries ultimately serve to strengthen the position of its "dominant" element. Marginalising non-British writers as belonging to the Anglophone and the non-French as belonging to the Francophone, in our view, serves only to strengthen the position of the colonial metropole from where these categories are created. While the

British, the Indian, and the Caribbean writer undoubtedly write from varying positions and perhaps of varying circumstances and in varying ways, we must not characterise one as having a unique claim to English literature. Questioning a binary conception of self and other would also lead to a questioning of the standard and variants. In criticism, we often grapple with the assumption of a fixed self and a destabilising other. Pluralistic comparative readings may be utilised to disrupt these relationships to place self/other and standard/variant(s) in intersections and continuums. This may also enable us to further appreciate alterities of aesthetics, forms, thematic engagements without centering the 'self' in such a reading. In other words, uneasy identifications must become rules rather than exceptions in Comparative Literature. Conversely, uneasy disidentifications must also be understood as possibilities. Naturally, within the post-Cold War, post 9/11 context, we already know which side stands to benefit from any notion of a unique claim to identity or reality. That is a risk we cannot afford to take!

These concerns are echoed in the increasing tokenisations that are operating particularly within the Western literary and critical spheres. They are also echoed by the increasing attempts to curb the voices of marginalised authors through persecution and ostracization within our own society no matter what those voices may be saying. Reading a work as a reflection of an objective reality or purely as a sociological statement may be detrimental to the cause of plurality. As Đurišin has suggested in his criticism of the early French school of Comparative Literature, literary relationships never develop between two elements but at several levels simultaneously. To read comparatively is to reinforce that old axiom that literature is always already comparative. The complex operations of integration and differentiation that circulates through the creation of an engagement with the text imply that a one-to-one identification is a restrictive and even a monolithic way of approaching narratives (qtd. in Dominguez 100). Furthermore, departing from such categorisations may also allow us to tread the spaces between them or rather tread the space at all as there is no clear-cut division between what makes a literary analysis "interliterary" or comparative and what makes it "intraliterary".

We suggest that it is at this volatile juncture that it is crucial to foreground 'relationality' or co-existences without complete accord, without viewing an individual and particularly an artist solely as the sum total of their identity. Rather, it would make for meaningful resistance on the part of the literary analyst to do the opposite; to revive the "surplus" as not marginal but central to human existence and expression. Literary analysis that functions primarily through this assumption may well be complementary to identity-based analysis and it may well be instrumental in ensuring that we evade the dangers of a single story.

In this final section of the paper, let us examine why literary revitalisation is particularly relevant to the Indian context. Rather, let us attempt to examine how the Indian context is particularly suited for this revitalisation if we look at the perspectives upon which the discipline has been founded and has grown within this country. Sisir Kumar Das in his essay, "Why Comparative Literature" justifies the need for comparative literary methodologies in understanding Indian literatures by suggesting that the inherent nature of Indian literature(s), that is, its multilingualism and multiple nationalisms demand wide literary perspectives (100). In order to avoid what Das terms as "linguistic parochialism" we suggest that it is necessary to not read these literatures through reductive sociological lenses at the expense of creating a solid functional methodology for comparative literature. The pitfalls mentioned earlier of faulty categorisations and deterministic meta-narratives could be possibly evaded through the robust practice of reading. In her *Phenomenology of Love and Reading*, Cassandra Falke suggests that while reading does not substitute for human relationality, it nevertheless makes us receptive to the approach of the 'other' and the ability to be changed for the better through the active understanding of the 'other.' She says, "Love expands us like water expands the river" (24) implying the same of reading. Therefore, even while Das reminds us that "Literature is not a body of impersonal knowledge without any relation to the people or to the time to which we belong,"

(100) it remains true that the most meaningful tool in the comparatist's arsenal is the ability to arrive at understandings, narratives, and conflicting truths without the need or necessity for reductive answers. This ability lies in the strength of our literary analysis. Therefore, we suggest that literary analysis is our means of journeying "from comparative Indian literature to comparative literature" and not vice versa (102).

We recognize that to argue the case for the centering of literary analysis only through frameworks of product and utility would always be frustrating and futile. The larger project, tangled with the politics of capital, politics, production, and competition over resources and the fundamental ways in which academia functions would be in shifting or re-working those particular frameworks. And that particular crisis, of having to "market" knowledge across unequal and reductive lines is in fact trans-disciplinary in its own way. To conclude with a brief illustration; the paper "A Caterpillar that eats Tortoise Shells" was published by the Archbold Biological Station, following a chance discovery from one of their interns, on a moth that builds life off of the shells of dead turtles. Against most odds, the paper gained traction beyond the circles of the Life Sciences, not due to the curious oddity of the moth, but rather the entomologists' moving case for its conservation in its final section "On Being Endangered; An Afterthought": "We should speak up on behalf of this little moth", they write, "not only because by doing so we would bolster conservation efforts now underway in Florida, but because we would be calling attention to the existence of a species so infinitely worth knowing" (Deyrup et al.).

Let that be our concluding, overarching persuasion for revitalizing the strength and potential of comparative literary analysis. That every story, like every moth, is infinitely worth knowing.

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# “There Will Be No Seepage, No Bleeding”: Play with Form and Language in Contemporary Narratives of Violence

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SHARANYA DG

**Abstract:** This paper deals with the question of how contemporary writers negotiate questions of structural violence in their lives and works, through a formal and textual analysis of Meena Kandasamy’s *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) and Adania Shibli’s *Minor Detail* (2020). Works that represent systematic oppression and violence often fall into the trap of voyeuristic and interrogative readings, that either work to assuage the guilt of the readers through empathy or question the authenticity and truth of the representations, thus discrediting them altogether. I argue that the chosen two novels reflect a foresight of such receptions, and resist them through a play with language and the experimental form of the novels.

**Keywords:** Experimental form, violence, human rights, representation, Palestine, India, contemporary literature

I try to erect a wall to keep these stories separate.  
If everything goes to plan, there will be no seepage, no bleeding  
– Meena Kandasamy, *Exquisite Cadavers* 11

The representation of pain and suffering caused due to systematic oppression does not just deal with questions of aesthetics, but also of ethics. While representation of violence and oppression is unquestionably important in the development of human rights, the ways in which these narratives unravel and are received/read also need to be considered. On the one hand, reading these texts as merely representations of violence create a binary of oppressor and victim, which inadvertently results in these narratives being subject to interrogation. This then raises questions of truth and authenticity, placing the burden of proof on the narrator. Focusing on identity and positionality of the characters and/or authors, on the other hand, leads to a voyeuristic reading that reduces these narratives to mere instruments that evoke empathy for the oppressed. In both these cases, there is a tendency for the aesthetic and sociopolitical considerations to be marginalised. This essay closely reads two contemporary novels that foresee such reception—Meena Kandasamy’s *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) and Adania Shibli’s *Minor Detail* (2020)—to understand how writers negotiate with the subject of structural violence through their lives and works. Through a formal and textual analysis of these short novels, this essay discusses how the two writers resist the voyeuristic and interrogative reading of pain and suffering through their use of language and experimental forms.

In the essay “Human Rights in Literary Studies,” James Dawes notes the various paradoxes that exist while considering human rights issues in literary studies. One such paradox is the effects of narrating suffering in a coherent manner: transforming pain and suffering into language could be a

cure as it allows the person to exercise control over the traumatic memory, or it could inflict new injuries and worsen the effects of trauma (Dawes 408). An artist or writer belonging to a marginalised group is often expected to represent their pain or suffering through their works. This is acknowledged by Meena Kandasamy in *Exquisite Cadavers*, as she says:

[...] to a Western audience, writers like me are interesting because

- We are from a place where horrible things happen, or,
- Horrible things have happened to us, or,
- A combination of the above.

[...] No one treats us as writers, only as diarists who survived. (10)

Reducing the lives and work of the artist to their pain and suffering not only intensifies the paradox of suffering by coercing them to represent it, but it also leads to another kind of paradox: one that deals with the questions of truth or authenticity and fiction in the act of storytelling. James Dawes cites the debates triggered by anthropologist David Stoll's accusation of Rigoberta Menchú fabricating the details in her biography *I, Rigoberta Menchú* which had already been a part of a "literary and political controversy" simply by being added into a course reading at Stanford in 1988 (403–404). David Stoll's accusation brought the text and Menchú back into the centre of the controversy, triggering further discussions regarding truth and credibility, as well as "the role of storytelling in human rights advocacy" (404). Dawes goes on to quote Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who bring up the testimony of a Holocaust survivor in Auschwitz, which was discredited by some historians only because she spoke of four chimneys being blown up whereas there had only been three. They note, "It was utterly important to remain accurate, lest the revisionists in history discredit everything" (qtd. in Dawes 404). But how does one ensure a hundred percent accuracy in revisiting memories, especially traumatic ones? Discussions focussing on the authenticity of such narratives therefore only reinforce the oppressive systems by casting doubt on and therefore further silencing the narratives of violence.

Human rights issues are often represented in a way that evokes the emotions of the readers. Empathy becomes an important tool in calling for action against atrocities. While empathy is generally considered to be a good and helpful trait in building and maintaining human relationships, allowing us to trespass the boundaries of the self to understand the joys and pains of the other, Paul Bloom invites us to consider the problems of empathy just as we do with other human capacities (16). The focus on particular incidents of violence being inflicted towards a particular subject/character in the work of art would garner empathy and sympathy from the readers, but this need not always be positive. Such a focus on particularities and details of violence is easily fetishized to assuage the guilt of the readers in positions of power, allowing them to turn a blind eye to the systemic nature of the violence. As Namwali Serpell eloquently notes in her essay "The Banality of Empathy," empathy is "a gateway drug to white saviorism, with its familiar blend of propaganda, pornography, and paternalism." It is this kind of empathy that leads to artists belonging to marginalised groups being treated as "diarists who survived" (Serpell).

Contemporary writers then must deal with overcoming these paradoxes through their works and actively resist these attempts to generalise and scrutinise their works, or even find solace in shedding tears over these stories of violence, while not seeing the structural and systemic ways in which they are marginalised. There is a need for writers to refuse the reduction of themselves and their characters to helpless victims of violent incidents through their narratives. The realist novel form, which classically follows an individual character's journey through conflicts and ends in a neatly tied resolution, conventionally enables the voyeuristic gaze of its readers into the lives of the author/character, making way for characterisations that invoke pity and guilt in the readers, which is then assuaged when the conflict is resolved. This realist form is therefore no longer a viable form for contemporary writers. Furthermore, there is also a need for the writers to distance themselves from the text to avoid being reduced to "diarists" and hence be held accountable to measures of authenticity. The two novels selected for study—Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) and Adania

Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2020)—reflect a foresight of the harmful reception of the text and the authors' lives. The rest of this essay will closely read the two texts to understand the ways in which these authors play with content, form, style and language to negotiate the questions of violence without falling into the trap of authenticity or empathy.

Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, writer, and translator whose works often deal with Dalit and feminist politics. Her third novel, *Exquisite Cadavers*, has been written in response to the reception of her previous novel, an auto-fictional work drawn from her experiences of being in an abusive marriage: *When I Hit You: Or, the Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*. While she had explicitly called this work a novel, the reviews "side-stepp[ed] the entire artistic edifice on which the work stood" (Kandasamy 1) by repeatedly calling it a memoir and reducing Kandasamy to this experience as a raped Indian woman and a beaten-up wife (2). *Exquisite Cadavers* is the product of her experimentation to remove herself as much as possible from the narrative by confining herself to the margins of the paper – literally – where she presents "each influence, each linchpin behind every freewheeling plot-turn" (2). Inspired by the surrealist tradition, she allows the narrative to be veered "purely in tandem with the ideas and templates [she] had chosen" (2). The resulting story is the domestic life of a young couple, the "suitably English" Maya (5) and her immigrant-filmmaking-student husband Karim, as they navigate through their work, marriage and an unplanned pregnancy in present-day London. Kandasamy as the author of this text is a hovering presence throughout as she relegates herself to the margins of the novel by cataloguing and confessing each inspiration and thought she had in the making of this story, whether it is the short film whose artist inspired the character of an immigrant filmmaker (5), the pathetic fallacy in Tamil poetics that led to "sentences burgeoning with a wet bleakness" (8), a justification for why she can write a story that is not of "her own" people in "her own" land (14), or even how an entire chapter needed to be dedicated to the question of mixed marriages and racism as Brexit flooded news headlines (48–58).

One of the questions Kandasamy hopes to answer through her experimental writing is if the margins exhibit "any tendency to respect [her] decision to cautiously separate the fictional and the real" (2). She begins her experimental writing with the intention to keep the story mundane and domestic: "Is it political?" Her husband asks in the margins, to which she confidently replies, "No, love. It is very domestic" (6). However, the political – along with the violence and the pain it inflicts – seeps into the text from the margins as the novel proceeds.<sup>1</sup> Questions of race and nationality make way into the *domestic* narrative as it becomes impossible not to deal with these topics in the political climate of the story being written. As political unrest becomes more and more rife in India, with her friends and comrades being arrested (and, to her relief, not killed), Kandasamy writes on the margins: "As all of this unfolds around me, I feel conflicted about keeping Maya and Karim in the safe cocoon of domesticity" (76). Immediately, the tone of the narrative shifts and an anxious Maya, waiting to break the news of their unplanned pregnancy, arrives at a locked home with her husband nowhere to be found. She only receives a text from him a while later which simply mentioned that he had to urgently leave to Tunis and could not give her any more details at that moment (79). Maya then recollects his "political, visionary, emotional" talks about necropolitics in the context of Tunisia, making her more scared for his life (88). These pages also narrate, albeit in the margins, the horrors of rising hate crimes in India since Narendra Modi was elected to power in 2014. This drastic shift in the plot through her experimental writing attests the inability of the figure of a writer/activist such as Kandasamy to escape questions of violence. The expectations of representation and the need to communicate the existence of injustice haunts the author despite her attempts to refrain from them.

The haunting of the expectations of representation can be seen in Kandasamy's guilt of living in London, as she asks herself if she is evading activism by staying in the margins (2). This guilt is betrayed multiple times in the novel, most notably when she narrates the incident where her husband, Cedric, asks her if she was planning to write about her friend Rona Wilson being arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case, to which she goes on about how that would be too much of a stretch as Karim

in this novel is Tunisian and the events would not be believable. Cedric clarifies that he meant if she would be writing about the arrests for a magazine or newspaper to help his case, and she writes, “I nod in vague agreement. / I’m ashamed that I’ve become so obsessed about this novel” (71). Kandasamy seems to hint at the sense of responsibility she carries as an artist and writer to bring to light the injustices in her home and towards her kin, whether it is in India, Sri Lanka, London, or Tunisia; “anywhere is home, everyone is kin,” she notes in the novel (14–15). This is further reiterated towards the end of the novel as she confesses that the process of writing and telling stories to keep readers entertained feels like “pressing Ctrl+Z a thousand times” (88), in an attempt to undo all the hate around us. She then writes: “Even if all the hate around us comes undone, what will become of those who were killed? They will never be brought back to life. And if we do nothing to challenge this atmosphere of hate, they will have died in vain. Their inert corpses will mock and mock our inaction” (88). This statement marks the end of her writing from the margins, and in the final chapter, we are confronted with the ramblings of Karim breaking down over a phone call about his brother being arrested in Tunis and of Maya going over the possible outcomes of this situation, with the refrain “What is the worst that could happen?” repeated incessantly (95–99). The anxiety of the possibilities of violence is rife within these pages. The absence of Kandasamy at the margins of this highly dramatized final chapter of the novel leaves the readers alone to deal with the feelings of abandonment and uncertainty, just like Karim and Maya (Wadsworth 23).

While *Exquisite Cadavers* explicitly states its refusal to be reduced to the experiences of a woman of colour, Palestinian author Adania Shibli’s *Minor Detail* narrates the horrors of the war in Palestine from the silences in between its lines (Cummins). Originally written in Arabic and translated into English by Elisabeth Jacquette, this novel is neatly divided into two different parts: the first follows the Israeli commander in Negev who, along with his troop, rapes and murders a Palestinian woman in August 1949; the second is narrated by an unnamed woman in Ramallah decades later, as she becomes obsessed with the story of the raped and murdered Palestinian, and sets on a journey to find the “whole truth” regarding this incident. The two narratives are set apart not just in space and time or by the existence of a page break, but the difference is also starkly presented through a shift in narration. The novel moves from a third-person narrator presenting the commander’s perspective to the rambling, stuttering, anxiety-ridden first-person narration in the second part. The third-person narration in the first part peacocks as the authoritative and objective truth, impassively narrating the minutest of details of sights, sounds, and smells of the Palestine that has been occupied by the troops. This forces intimacy with the commander as readers follow his every moment and movement for the span of those four days, but are denied any sort of perspective on others, especially the girl he rapes and murders. In contrast to this, the first-person narration in the second part betrays the irrationality of its narrator right from the beginning. We see the narrator – keeping true to her inability to intuitively know which borders can be crossed and which cannot – attempting to breach the rigidly constructed boundaries between the two parts in her quest to break through the “objective” narrative of the first part for no rational reason other than the date of the murder, which coincidentally was exactly a quarter of a century before she was born (Shibli 64). These contrasting details makes the erasure of truth and the girl’s narrative more apparent throughout the novel. As Mireille Juchau rightfully notes, “Shibli’s precise language and formal innovation create a palimpsest—the real hovers (almost imperceptibly) above the imagined, just as the past shadows and irradiates the present” (Juchau).

Both the authors explicitly refuse to let their works be received as representative of the groups they speak for. Adania Shibli rejects the idea of being ascribed a representative of Palestine through her works, especially for the Western audience, in an interview with Mireille Juchau: “I really don’t care how people in Germany or elsewhere think about Palestine” (qtd. in Juchau). As opposed to Kandasamy, who insists on her engagement with questions of violence being literary, Shibli states that her “concern with Palestine is a personal one, not a literary one. It forms my literature; but my literature is never about Palestine. It is rather within and from Palestine as a condition of injustice; of



the normalization of pain and degradation” (qtd. in Juchau). By asserting her personal relationship with Palestine and its related pain and injustice, Shibli refuses to be the spokesperson for her land and people. This issue is addressed by Kandasamy right from the epigraph to her novel, where she quotes M. NourbeSe Philip: “The purpose of avant-garde writing for a writer of colour is to prove you are human.” She then sets out to narrate the story of “other people other lands” (14), having justified her ability to do so in the margins by citing a Tamil poet and philosopher: “Anywhere is home, everyone is kin” (14). She goes on to support her endeavour through the character of Karim, who wishes to make a British film for his student project, but is unable to do so as his professors want him to represent his Arab ancestry through his film. The expectations of representation, however, does not end here, as they want him to go “only so far, no further” when he suggests traveling to the poorest suburbs of Tunisia with the highest number of ISIS recruits to make a film that he wishes to (38–41). This paradox of representation is addressed by Shibli in her novel as well, when the narrator is apologetic towards the readers for narrating violence: “By the way, I hope I didn’t cause any awkwardness when I mentioned the incident with the soldier, or the checkpoint, or when I reveal that we are living under occupation here” (Shibli 59–60).

It is also interesting to note that both these novels present two different narratives side-by-side. While the two parts are laid out one after the other with a clear boundary through a page break and being set decades apart in *Minor Detail*, they are connected through motifs of barking dogs, smell of petrol, and the description of the Palestinian landscape. The connection however resists rational explanations, as mentioned above. In *Exquisite Cadavers*, the story of Maya and Karim is accompanied by the author’s notes on the margins of the same pages, forcing a break in the flow of reading as readers go back and forth the same page to read Kandasamy in the margins. Both the authors refuse to allow the readers to arrive at completion through their experimentation with the form of the novel: the process of reading itself becomes fragmented with the two narratives laid out simultaneously in *Exquisite Cadavers*, whereas *Minor Detail* refuses to let the female narrator find closure in her quest for the whole truth, leaving her and hence the readers with just the narrative presented from the perspective of the Israeli commander and the official records of the incident. The concept of historical truth is thus challenged by avoiding the “museumification” of the events that transpired years ago in the dark history of Palestinian occupation (Aamir 27). This fragmentation and distance created through the form hinders readers from empathising with the characters.

It is not just the existence of multiple, fragmentary narratives that resist the classical realist structure of the novel form in these two texts; both these authors play with language to highlight of the limits of linguistic expression and the inability to present a coherent narrative. Kandasamy metafictionally refers to this inability in the opening chapter of her story, using the metaphor of home objects that hide the problems of a marriage-in-shambles: “Order creates the semblance of domestic peace,” she writes, and that “The space imposes conformity, demands signing up to obedience. To break the silence, it becomes imperative to break the pretence of peace” (Kandasamy 5). Applying this observation to the novel itself, it can be argued that the dominant structure of the novel needs to be broken in order to uncover the blanket of silence over it, and present narratives of pain and suffering. The pretence of peace constructed by stringing together signifiers to impose a comprehensible and palatable narrative must be unravelled by contemporary authors in order to be able to lay bare the violence inflicted upon their lives and communities. Shibli’s text, too, is a play with the possibilities of what can be conveyed through silences between the lines. In fact, silence remains a central motif throughout the text. There is always a mention of deafening silences where marginalised narratives could have been: when the commander explains their mission in Negev, “[n]one of them commented on what was said, and silence filled the tent for several seconds” (Shibli 8); just before the commander puts to vote whether the captured girl would be raped by the troop or “kept safe” by assigning kitchen duty, “[a] thick silence prevailed” (39); and when the narrator in the second part comes across an old woman who could have heard about the incident, “the words do not emerge from my

mouth. The silence between us stretches on, as vast as nature's silence expanding around us, and tightens its grips" (109). These moments engulfed in silence hint at the processes of systemic erasure, along with other signifiers such as the differences between the Israeli map and the map of Palestine before 1948, both of which are often referenced by the narrator throughout her journey. The linguistic erasure on maps, according to Shibli, is one of the first experiences of "the betrayal of language" (Juchau). The recollection of this betrayal of language allows the novel to "break the pretence of peace" and thus reveal more than what language can express.

While speaking about language, it is important to address the question of translation in *Minor Detail*. Shibli mentions that the novel "started from this contemplative inquiry on how the complacency of language can inflict pain—and also how the complacency of language can deflect pain. These two base ideas were all that I started with, nothing else" (qtd. in Juchau). The primacy of language, she confesses in her interview with Mireille Juchau, made the translation process into English challenging. The linguistic experience in Arabic forms an important space within the text due to the history of violence and colonisation of the land, which becomes difficult to retain in the translated text (Juchau). However, the translation by Elisabeth Jacquette is able to bring in these intricacies in terms of what is written or spoken out and what is not. Speaking more about the use of Arabic in the novel in another interview with Claudia Steinberg, Shibli mentions the difference between spoken and classical, written language. According to her, written language belongs to its own domain (Steinberg). The domain of the written language can be studied within the novel—even in the English translation—as it is descriptive and the voice of the narrator is glaringly predominant in both parts. There is barely any dialogue within both the parts of the novel; there are two long direct, quoted speech: first, when the commander gives a speech to the soldiers during the celebration after they shoot the Arabs and capture the girl (Shibli 37–38), and second, when the owner of the museum narrates the history of Nirim to the narrator in part II (90–92). Both these speeches reinforce the official narrative, as they come from positions of power. These speeches, spoken in a clear and calm manner, are contrasted with the narrator's stuttering voice and rambling narrative style: "And he begins speaking in a voice so calm and clear, so untouched by stuttering, stammering or rambling, that it feels as if he is smoothly unravelling a delicate thread, one which cannot easily be cut" (Shibli 90). This contrast is addressed by Shibli as well: "In *Minor Detail*, the tension lies not between the spoken and the written word but between eloquent language with its clarity, which originates in a position of power, and its opposite: a broken, fragmented language" (qtd. in Steinberg).

In addition to revealing the existence of violence between the lines, the silences penetrate through the otherwise linear narrative structure of the novel. In her interview with Juchau, Shibli confesses her repulsion by linear narrative structures. Experimental writing, she says, is:

[...] where suddenly language can liberate itself from its functionality and instrumentality. Over the past few years, I moved from genuinely not caring about the narrative form, which probably shows in my writing from early on, to being deeply disgusted by the narrative form. I say disgusted because I have this very physical reaction to linear structure. It is within such structures that I feel a grand narrative can exist, like a dictatorship—solid, like the worst tyrant. And I try to use it in cases where tyranny is at stake, so the form dictates the content. Linear narrative structure is a dictator. (qtd. in Juchau)

It is this understanding of linear structure as a tyrannical dictator that allows *Minor Detail* to coldly refuse to narrate the "whole truth" of what transpired on the 13<sup>th</sup> August 1949. The narrative from the perspective of the Israeli commander is presented in a tone that seems to claim wholeness and truth, but the readers are soon confronted with the fact that there exist other perspectives that are denied to us through the unfruitful quest in the second part.

Having seen the ways in which these two novels deal with questions of violence through a play with form, style and language, the paradox of truth and authenticity as well as that of relaying pain and suffering needs to be revisited. On the one hand, the inability to arrive at the whole truth forms

the central theme of *Minor Detail* as seen above. Violence is rendered visible using the motif of silences that speak loudly amidst the rambling focus on minor details and act as signposts of erasure of narratives. Kandasamy, on the other hand, strips herself away from the narrative by relegating herself to the margins, but is unable to divorce the political from the mundane or the personal. Despite the stark difference in their approach to representing violence, what remains common to both these texts is the resistance to questions of authenticity by citing the processes (from the margins or through silences that indicate omission and erasure) through which the story came to be just that – a constructed story – and not a testimony that seeks the empathy of the readers.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While this essay is more concerned with *how* the questions of violence are dealt with than whether or not a woman of colour can narrate a tale that is merely domestic, it becomes important to understand the literary processes through which Kandasamy arrives at writing violence despite her attempts not to do so.

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# The Correspondence Between City and its Margin in the Jewish Novels of Isaac Goldemberg and Mario Szichman

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ABHIRUPA ROY

**Abstract:** The paper sheds light on Isaac Goldemberg's *The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner* and Mario Szichman's *At 8:25 Evita Became Immortal* to bring in focus the Latin American marginal in spatial and ethnic terms. The spatial in the said novels is traced in the shady peripheries that have given refuge to those who have been ousted by the privileged. The ethnic is manifested by the community of migrant Jews who remain in the constant fear of a pogrom being around the corner. Lima, in Goldemberg, and Buenos Aires, in Szichman, were the two major cultural hubs of Latin America during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet there existed a deep-rooted anti-Semitic wave that often goes unvoiced in the mainstream Latin American literature. The paper attempts to underscore the importance of Goldemberg and Szichman's novels with respect to a hegemonic universality, represented by the texts, where the plural voices of the spatial and ethnic marginals coexist subverting the absolute frame of power.

**Keywords:** Hegemony, marginal, space, performativity, universalism, particularism

The Jews as the ethnic marginal in Latin America have evolved over time from the vulnerable status of a migrant community to the empowered position of a potential subject, influencing the urban panorama of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Isaac Goldemberg's *The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner* and Mario Szichman's *At 8:25 Evita Became Immortal* portray the marginalized Jewish minority against the Peruvian and Argentine urban context respectively. The economic and cultural prospect of the Peruvian capital, Lima, hovers over Goldemberg's narrative that, primarily, revolves around the decisions and choices made by Don Jacobo Lerner to negotiate the present Peruvian reality with his Jewish past. Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital, acts as the primary witness to the impact of an elitist political culture on the Pechofs' crooked but innocuous aspirations in the face of an impending anti-Semitic pogrom. The city in the said novels is both the site and character where and around whom the narratives unfold. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre emphasizes the problematics of space, an idea that has developed from a mathematical denomination of structure to the Kantian embodiment of consciousness. Lefebvre traces the philosophical history of space to emphasize the conflicts between symmetry and asymmetry, the concrete and abstract, the objective and subjective, embodied by the entity of space (Lefebvre 2). In one of his interviews, Mario Szichman relates his experience of working in collaboration with television as a news editor, "this experience helped me imagine the scenes of my novels as if they decorated and put people as they lived backstage, spying on history from behind" ("esa experiencia me ayudó a imaginar las escenas de mis novelas como si fueran decorados y a mis personajes como viviendo entre bastidores, espionando la historia por su enves," Google Translate trans., quoted in Hall 56). Szichman's use of the theatrical term, "bastidores," that stands for the wings or backstage, stresses upon the marginal place, inhabited

by his characters, with the history of the privileged, unveiling at the fore. The term, “espiando,” is also pertinent in this context as it refers to the act of peeping at rather than participating in the discourse of history. In response to Szichman’s reference to the Jewish characters, spying on the play of history from the backstage, one may read Goldemberg’s idea of history as participating in mythical memories. Goldemberg alludes to his idea of the Jewish exile as a synthesis of history and myth where both the Latin American present and primal Jewish past assimilate (Goldemberg, “A Journey”). However, the paper argues that besides the Jewish characters, the city too is an entity of particularism, engaged in an exchange with its Jewish counterpart. In an alternative scenario to the centre/margin binary, the city, as an embodiment of the objective and concrete, participates with the personal myth of the Jewish consciousness while the dominant ideologies of nationalism and ethnic majoritarianism lurk behind.

Northrop Frye, while he argues the importance of Shakespeare’s plays to be founded on his characters rather than any historical relevance, writes, “[i]n drama, characterization depends on function: what a character is follows from what he has to do in the play. Dramatic function in its turn depends on the structure of the play: the character has certain things to do because the play has such and such a shape” (Frye 271). The performative aspect of the texts of Goldemberg and Szichman may be traced in their embodiment of the historical consciousness that is subject to change. Goldemberg’s novel, written in 1976 with the rise of subaltern voices in the spectrum of Latin American literature, trails back as early as 1920s when the mass exodus took place from eastern Europe and ends with reference to mid-1930s with the World War II hovering above. Although Szichman wrote *At 8:25 Evita Became Immortal* in 1981 as part of the same movement in which Goldemberg marks his emergence, the novel is based in the Argentina of 1952 when Evita Perón dies; moreover, there is intimation of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919 that the Pechofs had witnessed before they left their Russian homeland. Goldemberg and Szichman’s novels may be read across the lines of early, middle and late-20<sup>th</sup> century, not without a changing spatial paraphernalia. The element of characterological dimension of the city, in the vein of Frye’s argument, may be tracked in the “function” or role the city plays in unfolding the plots. Lima is represented as the elusive chalice in the trajectory of Don Jacobo Lerner from being a “[man] of enterprise” to a “[c]razy man” (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 45, 21). In pursuit of Lima, Lerner leaves Chapén and abandons Bertila, Efraín, the son Berila conceives of Lerner, León Mitrani, his childhood friend with whom Lerner is reunited in Chapén, and Samuel Edelman, the Jew Lerner looks up to. Lima, with its prospects as well as effects of alienation, is not only a static site of narrative development. It functions as an identity with changing contours of promises and discrimination that both attract and repel the Wanderer. Buenos Aires participates in the cynical humour of Szichman’s narrative by indulging in a wry mourning of the death of Eva Perón. The city halts to an absolute stasis with the death of the First lady which, in turn, unleashes an extravaganza of lamentation, “[a]t eight twenty-five, the time when the lady became immortal, death certificates were cancelled until further notice, the silence of uniforms fell everywhere, everywhere there were funereal whisperings, and a cold, thin rain made everything gray” (Szichman 6). “Eight twenty-five,” when the entire Argentine capital had to refrain from any form of activity as a display of condolence, bears a symbolic importance in Szichman’s narrative, besides being an allusion to the ideology of nationalism. The temporal denominator of “eight twenty-five” also acts as a spatial denominator of standstill, embodied by the city, that is as threatened as the Jewish minority by the exuberant manifestation of political cult.

Lynne Huffer, in “There is no Gomorrah”: Narrative Ethics in Feminist and Queer Theory,’ founds her notion of ethics against the discourse of sameness thrust upon the feminist and queer identities leading to the procedure of further relegating the queer. Taking the cue from the French novelist Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, Huffer stresses on the element of inaccessibility of the other as she traces the effacement of alterity through narrative repetition. While both Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God for their subversive acts of homosexuality, Gomorrah’s identity is merged



with that of Sodom, “[i]n the sedimented, centuries-old text called “Sodom,” how do we hear Gomorrah? (Huffer 3). Brandy Daniels, while attempting a reading of Lynne with relation to Christian ethics, writes, “[n]ot only is Gomorrah actually destroyed along with Sodom, but the particularity of its difference is discursively destroyed, collapsed into Sodom . . .” (Daniel 298). Colette’s reading of the Biblical allusion renders the spatial element of Gomorrah an alterity that is performative in nature. Gomorrah is not only the other to the Lord’s sense of righteousness, but also to Sodom; this repetitive manner of othering renders Gomorrah an effacement (Huffer 2–3). Huffer’s intervention in Colette’s discourse lies in her act of tracing a narrative ethics that is manifested by repetition, difference, effacement and a spectral presence of the effaced other. Lima is manifested in Goldemeburg’s novel as an entity that bears the inscription of effacement of Lerner’s past. As soon as Jacobo Lerner arrives at the capital, the city ceases to be an embodiment of fulfilled promises and dreams. The first place Lerner visits after he alights from the bus, that has transported him from Chapén to Lima, is his brother, Moisés’s store. It is Moisés’s exponentially growing business in Lima drives Jacobo to leave Chapén while he was assured by his brother of a partnership in the latter’s commercial firm:

He walks toward the Central Market where his brother Moisés has his store. When he reaches the corner of Abancay and Moquegua, he asks a passerby to show him the way. He goes around the block and stops at Jirón Huanuco. He walks a block more and arrives at his brother’s store. The metal gate is down and secured by two enormous padlocks. Jacobo goes into the shop next door to ask about his brother’s address. The owner of the shop, a fat man with oily eyes, tells him that he has made no mistake, that indeed Moisés Lerner’s place of business is the neighbouring one, but it has not been open for more than a week. He does not know what might have happened. (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 76–77).

Huffer argues that the other is marked by its repetitive absence that eventually asserts the essence of the other’s inaccessibility. The epistemology of knowing the other is guided by a narrative ethics of repetitive absence (Huffer 2). The winding path of Lima to Moisés’s store, of which Lerner’s self is unfamiliar, is marked by a differentiability of delay and absence with respect to Chapén’s parochial approachability, that Lerner had once availed and then abandoned. By the time Lerner arrives at the closed store of Moisés, he must have realized that he has confronted the Gomorrah of Lima.

Rupayan Mukherjee’s “In the Aura of Objects: Flanerie, Remembrance and De-subjectification in *The Museum of Innocence*” traces the journey of a flaneur who strolls around the city of Istanbul collecting objects that do not correspond to the urban bourgeoisie consciousness. Mukherjee reads the lovelorn protagonist, Kemal, in Orhan Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence*, as the alternative historiographer who dwells on the fringes of the urban milieu:

Fusun is the embodiment of the ecstasy which Kemal the flaneur seeks in his relentless quest of the cityscape. This journey is not limited to a topological confinement where the city is validated as a mere locational paradigm. Instead, Kemal’s exploration of the urban heteropolis constitutes a consciousness of the other temporalities . . .” (Mukherjee 48)

Jacobo Lerner’s interaction with Lima is no less a flanerie that Mukherjee describes, in the context of Kemal, as “an urge to hunt and in turn be haunted” (48). Lima comes to manifest the spectral form of Lerner’s past that he desperately and vainly tries to locate in the material. The past pertaining to a Jewish legacy is de-subjectified as Lerner confronts the element of duality in the city-space of Lima; gradually, Lerner, the Wanderer, turns into Lerner, the flaneur. The process of Lerner’s de-subjectification oscillates between the material and abstract. The more Lerner tries to manifest his identity through objects, the more dissipated his memories become leading to an evanescent sense of self. In contrary to his aspirations of entering into a partnership in his brother’s business and starting a devout life by marrying a Jewish woman, Lerner establishes himself as a brothel-owner in Lima. Mir Yarfitz’s “Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina” discusses the rise of Varsovia Israelite Mutual Aid and Burial Society, a welfare organization, that was run by the Jewish

brothel owners, pimps, Madams and traffickers in women during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Yarfitz traces the Argentine scenario particularly, the circumstances were not very dissimilar in Peru either. Emphatically pertinent, especially, is Yarfitz's reading of the conflict within the Jewish community between the brothel-owners and those who led the mainstream living that consisted of an important aspect of the contemporary urban formation (Yarfitz 3). Yarfitz also writes that, in variance with popular anti-Semitic representation of Jewish traffickers that was partly racist, many Jewish prostitutes were reported to claim of their consensual participation in the sex-trade (16). The self, that Lerner's Gomorrah-Lima contradicts, addresses the Jews as a "restless race" to be "mixed with our own Indian one, the issue of which would certainly be the ideal type of Andean man," as documented in the "Chronicles:1923" (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 7).

The Lima Jacobo Lerner interacts with, not without anxiety, does not necessarily cater to the Peruvian nationalist ideology of procreation:

... Jacobo cultivated the friendship of other Jews who, like him, had no family. Men deformed by solitude, whose dreams were shaped by illusions. They met, usually, at Jacobo's whorehouse, where they would give themselves heart and soul to the dissonant atmosphere. On these nights their lust went unbounded, and they left the marks of their emptiness on the bodies of the courtesans. (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 150)

The material prosperity, earned by Lerner, ironically enhances his alienation from his own community that, in turn, contributes to the Peruvian nationalist ideology of assimilation. Not unlike Kemal who oscillates between the liminal, represented by Fusun's memories, and the dominant force of his bourgeoisie reality, the line demarcating an object-obsessed consumerist urban self from the other that lurks around the insignificant is blurred in Jacobo Lerner as well. The countless wanderings, undergone by Lerner that begins from his village, Staraya Ushitza, via the Dneiper River, Kiev and Koresten in the Soviet Union, Krakow and Warsaw in Poland, Hamburg in Germany, Port of Callao, Chepén and ends with Lima in Peru, could be tracked as the graph that leads to his eventual material prosperity; for instance, Lerner's possession of a living room with "armchairs covered in a flowered material . . . with their plump and dusty cushions," a dining room with "eight chairs upholstered in red velvet around the heavy, dark table," a study with an "old walnut desk," a bedroom with "the Louis XVI bed" and other valuables (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 30). As the solitary ailing Jacobo Lerner, confined to his sickbed, ponders over his possessions, asymmetrical lines of memories interrupt the inventory of objects owned by him. Mukherjee signifies *flânerie* as an act that unsettles the "ontological singularity of the self" making way for a "suggestive, speculative and . . . non-empirical reality" (Mukherjee 49). Memories in Lerner is not only a medium of performing the de-subjectification; the mnemonic itself embodies the *flânerie*, chugging across the winding terrain of the past only to end in the entangled paraphernalia of the urban, "[h]is life seemed like a trip that began in Chepén and ended in Staraya Ushitza, in front of the abandoned body of his father, and as if Lima were a weightless region somewhere between these two spaces" (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 31).

The relation between city and the marginal is being traced in the present discussion in a two-fold manner: the Jewish characters comprise an element of alterity like the othered half of the city, manifesting poverty, prostitution, theft and acts that exceed morality in the normative sense; besides being in correspondence with the city as its counterpart, the Jewish characters are also based upon the plane of the city. In the context of the second scenario, the Jewish presence marks a periphery on the urban plane with the elite occupying the centre while in the first, the Jews embody a peripherality along with the alternative form of the urban. The affliction caused by the extravagant mourning following the death of Evita Perón, the First Lady, is shared by the Jewish family of the Pechofs and the city of Buenos Aires alike:

The funeral of the lady put Buenos Aires into suspended animation. Past and future were linked by the deterioration of some buildings and the addition of a few new ones that never went beyond the stage

of frames and scaffolds . . . Daily life ceased on the first day of the funeral. The Pechof family, who had not yet buried Rifque, found to their dismay that the signing of death certificates had been forbidden. (Szichman 5-6)

The death certificate of Rifque, signed by a government official, where the Pechofs have forged their identity as some Gutiérrez Anselmi, would transform their identity from being migrant Jews to aristocratic Christians. A wreck of their aspirations brings about a series of performative acts on the part of the Pechofs as they learn new mannerisms and alters their furnishings to fit into an Argentine Christian surrounding. The city of Buenos Aires too undergoes a change of belongings as public transport vehicles go out of circulation, street-lights are replaced with vapor lamps, roads are covered with cobbled stones instead of asphalt due to the declining economy of the state (Szichman 5). The resources of the city that are perturbed by the event of Evita Perón's death has also made the lives of the Pechofs more difficult with respect to the mundane, "[f]orced by the rising price of cement, he got himself a good-looking son called Roni, and offered him as *chazin* to millionaires interested in marrying off their big-nosed daughters" (7).

The city, in a way, contributes to the performativity of duplicity carried on by the marginal in order to oppose the monopoly of the political elite; the contribution is, however, mutual. In response to Salmen's protests against assimilation of the Jewish identity with the Peruvian Christians, Jaime, the protagonist and one of the Pechof siblings, says to his brother, "[y]ou live in Argentina. Here there are tangos and good looking women in the outskirts of the city . . . there are creeks and valleys, Muñoz the Badman, students who seduce beautiful girls, and musicians who made the tango triumph in Paris" (32). Contradicting the precept of classical Marxism of absolute universality, Ernesto Laclau suggests a universal existence where particularities exist in a paradoxical relation of conflicts. As a result, the conflict-ridden structure renders the position of power unstable and contestable. Laclau terms such a relation as the hegemonic turn in the discourse of politics (Laclau 47). The city and the Jewish characters in Szichman complement as well as contradict each other. While the Pechofs laboriously look for means to disguise their past, Buenos Aires with its aristocratic lineage hinders the materialization of those plans. The Pechofs, in this context, is the marginal in the spatial sense as they are relegated to the corners. Towards the fag end of the novel, the Pechofs are shown fleeing Buenos Aires lest they face an enquiry, "[u]p front, in the cab, Jaime watched the blunt snout of the panel truck relentlessly charging on like a bull against his years of training, his posturing, his fine phrases, abolishing illustrious memories while the city sank into the pampas like a block of ice in water" (Szichman 287). The hegemonic relation between the city and Pechofs leads to a constant play of domination swinging from one side to another. The anti-Semitic doctor, whom Jaime invites to his place to convince him of their Christian lineage so that he signs Rifque's death certificate, dies in a brawl at the Pechofs' house. The Pechofs, defeated, leave Buenos Aires in a panel truck with a war trophy, nevertheless, ". . . and in the panel truck was the trunk. The doctor within it served to confirm that [Jaime's] fight to liberate himself from a history without a future had to start at ground zero once again" (288).

In response to Stefan Rummens's charge of ambiguity against Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's idea of hegemony in a democratic structure, Mouffe states that the empty place of power in a hegemonic relation of domination refers to an occupied position at the centre that is open to contestations. Unlike a totalitarian state, a democratic state initiates a political order where the occupation of the power-position is temporary (Mouffe 678-679). While tracing the trajectory of a hegemonic relation, Mouffe suggests the turn from the political category of antagonism to that of agonism, "[b]ut there is another way in which the antagonism or the friend/enemy distinction can manifest itself, namely in an agonistic way. When we speak about agonism, the conflict is not one between friends and enemies but between adversaries who recognize the legitimacy of each other's position" (683). Goldemberg and Szichman's novels represent the correspondence between the city and Jewish margin, which also pertains to the margin of the city itself, as an agonistic one. With their own

maneuvers of dominating each other, be it through a spatial othering of the Jews on the part of the city or objectifying the city into a trope to attain commercial gains on the part of the Jews, the two share a conflict-ridden formation that is irreconcilable yet democratic. The two forces add to each other's forms of agency in destabilizing the unmediated binary of centre/margin. The totalitarian attempts of the Peruvian nationalist ideology to reduce the Jews into a mere racial element and that of the Argentine elite to indulge the masses in cult politics are countered by the agonistic relation between the city and its margin. Moreover, the city does not only embody one of the particularist forces, but also the terrain of negotiations on which those variety of particularities negotiate, a condition suggested by Laclau as necessary for the formation of public space (Butler, Laclau et al. 7).

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# Between Menarche and Mobility: Locating Gender in the Works of Hephzibah Jesudasan and Rajathi Salma

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KEERTHANA SWAMINATHAN

**Abstract:** Narratives on menarche and its impact on the lives of women demand to be recognized and probed into. Using the frameworks of social psychology and gender studies, the article closely examines the fiction of two Tamil writers, Hephzibah Jesudasan and Rajathi Salma, who have dealt with post-menarcheal female imprisonment in their works. An attempt is made to analyse and juxtapose the concepts of *Irserippu* (former practice in Tamil societies) and the *Purdah* system (former practice in India) as evinced in their fiction to understand the cultural undercurrents of such social mores. In doing so, how such customs are strategically designed by patriarchy to curtail women's mobility and categorize them based on their behaviour will be scrutinized. This phenomenological study accentuates the process of understanding the gendered subjectivities enabled by the socio-cultural doctrines, besides examining the nexus between the seemingly innocuous benevolence of paternalist customs, women's labour and mobility.

**Keywords:** gender socialization, culture, desire, spatiality, patriarchy, mobility

## Introduction

The advent of colonialism in India paved the way for such political dichotomies that made exclusive the “outside/world” as the territory of men as against the “inside/house” as the space of women (Chatterjee 623). Under the pretext of safeguarding the “spiritual” essence of the nation, women's mobility was curtailed, and liberty was questioned (624). Although loosely related to the concept of *Irserippu*, which was practised from the Sangam Age till the colonial period (as evident from the novel), and the *Purdah* system, which was practiced till a few years ago in remote pockets of Tamil Nadu, the aforementioned argument of Partha Chatterjee is vital as he rightly pinpoints the historical contingencies informing bigoted homosocial segregations. Writing about the post-menarcheal female imprisonment and homosocial delimitation of spatiality, how two writers from Tamil Nadu have captured the cultural sentiments and criticized the hypocrisy of such practices like *Irserippu* and *Purdah* will be probed upon in the present study. A phenomenological enquiry is pursued by revisiting female writing as a part of “a historically based conception of feminism as against the liberal-pluralist understanding of feminism” (Alexander and Mohanty xvi). While Hephzibah Jesudasan wrote during the mid-twentieth century, Salma is a contemporary writer. Despite the difference in decades of writing and their varied cultural and religious practices, there is an uncanny overlapping in the concerns of these two writers, which is their take on post-menarcheal female imprisonment. Their semi-fictional narratives portray how the right to education, the freedom to exercise agency, and the chance to socialize with the male members of society come to a sudden halt in the lives of girls following menarche. I employ the “theory in the flesh” concept to analyse the socio-psychological repercussions of sexist socialization to complicate the understanding of the affective contours of the body in the wake of puberty. This phenomenological approach



accentuates the process of understanding the gendered subjectivities enabled by the socio-cultural doctrines, besides exposing the seemingly innocuous benevolence of paternalist customs. In this connection, to comprehend the subtleness of sexism perpetuated under these specific cultural practices, I employ the tool of “benevolent sexism” that perceives women only in traditional roles and is seemingly positive in approach.

Studies on sexism, stereotypes and internalization cannot be naively disregarded as outdated or irrelevant at any point in history. The Supreme Court of India’s act of releasing a handbook on gender stereotypes in August 2023 is a solid attempt to reconcile the concerns of academia with those of the common lot. Irrespective of the studies on gender norms (Lindsey), spatiality and women’s roles (Duncan), socialization and adult behavioural patterns (Srinivasan), there is a paucity of research that is comprehensive in its scope while dealing with these issues. Since gender socialization is primarily the means “through which the ideology of sexism is passed on” and “feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression”, the present study intends to bring them together to locate and problematize the origin of gender dichotomy (Harper 9; Hooks 26). Similarly, except for rare critical commentaries on Hephzibah’s novels and a couple of studies on Salma’s works, an in-depth analysis focusing on the root cause of sexism driven by paternalism is yet to be documented (Chellappa; Lakshmi). This further emphasizes the importance of the present study, which delves into the experiential narratives of the two women writers. In doing so, the present study will look at the idea of space, gender normativity, and socialization as inextricably wedded concepts that consequently mould the experiences of the body.

Steadfast in their purpose of exposing the popular stereotypes associated with their communities, which they represented through novels, both Jesudasan and Salma are vital feminist icons in the canon of Tamil literature. Jesudasan C, a Tamil Professor and the husband of Hephzibah hinted at the predominance of Brahmin writers and the portrayal of their lifestyle in Tamil literature in the late 1950s (Mangai). This motivated Hephzibah Jesudasan to narrate the life she was accustomed to and the lives of the people and community she was a part of. The lives of Christian “Paniyeri Nadars”, or the people from the Christian toddy tapering community, are carefully narrativized without losing the charm of the ‘Nanjil’ region in her novels. On the other hand, Rajathi Salma throws light on the plight of women, particularly Muslim women, whose worlds are often closed behind the doors of their houses. From writing on tattered papers and sanitary napkins hiding in bathrooms during late nights to emerging as a political icon, activist, and writer, Salma vibrantly embodies the idea of emancipated womanhood. Her fiction registers the screaming silences and steaming desires of women who are suppressed by the dictates of male chauvinism.

### Mapping ‘Her-stories’ through ‘Histories’

Revealing the multidimensionality of sexism under the terminology ‘ambivalent sexism’, Susan Fiske and Peter Glick bifurcated sexism into ‘hostile’ and ‘benevolent’ forms. While the overtly toxic expressions of sexism are categorised as ‘hostile’ forms, benevolent sexism is more malevolent than the former as it couches sexism under the ruse of prosocial behaviours (Glick and Fiske 491). The codes of oppression in Hephzibah and Salma’s works tend to reflect the ideology of ‘protective paternalism’, stemming from benevolent sexism, as it hints at the ‘dyadic relationship’ of men and women (Glick and Fiske 493). Before the textual analysis of such problematic dyadic relationships, it is imperative to make sense of the type of feminism that the texts attempt to engage with. In what can be considered a trailblazing work in the annals of third-world feminisms, the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua propounded the concept of “theory in the flesh”. This concept is defined as a study of the physical realities of life, inclusive of one’s skin color, the land or concrete one grew up on, and even one’s sexual longings, creating a politic born out of necessity (Moraga and Anzaldua 19). Introduced in the context of women of colour, this theory serves to “discern, disrupt and challenge knowledge

constructions through the embodied subjectivities” of women (Fernandez 224). This epistemological tool combined with the theory of ‘protective paternalism’ assist us in reviewing the affective overlapping of the personal and the political. The extension of the same in the context of Salma and Jesudasan is useful in studying how feminism differs from and depends on one’s social location. By utilising writing as a form of self-preservation, these writers have clearly illustrated the ways in which women draw their feminism from the culture they grow (42).

Set in the 1940s, Panaivilai, a village in Tamil Nadu, *Putham Veedu*, was initially published in Tamil in 1964. The novel was translated into English as *Putham House* in 2021 as part of the initiative taken by the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation. It narrates the lives of *Paniyeri Nadars* through the eyes of the protagonist, Lizzy. She was born into a conservative Christian family headed by the patriarch Kannapachi, Lizzy’s grandfather. Kannapachi, the owner of the only tiled house in Panaivilai, is a respected elder and deacon in their village church. The lives of his two sons, Ponnumuthu and Ponnuthambi, are abject and miserable. Despite the declining condition of their house, which is symbolic of her family, Lizzy chooses to see good in everything. The undoing of Lizzy’s family and her subsequent marriage to Thangaraj, who is below her family status, comprises the plot of this Bildungsroman novel. The novel also tellingly captures the power dynamics and social changes vis-a-vis caste and class mobility. Originally published in Tamil as *Irandam Jamangalin Kathai* (2004), Salma’s debut novel was translated as *The Hour Past Midnight* by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2009. Narrating the cloistered lives of Muslim women belonging to six families, this novel touches upon various issues, starting from intimate partner violence, sex-based socialization, child marriage and the politics behind female pleasure. Any attempt to summarize the novel is reductive as it is concerned with the multifaceted nature of familial dysfunctions. She unabashedly exposes the parochial interpellation in women and reiterates the need for women’s solidarity to counter the male hegemony.

The nascent changes in Tamil Nadu in the mid-twentieth century pertaining to class mobility and caste consciousness are vividly documented in Jesudasan’s novel. Her depiction of social progress involved portraying people from the lower rungs of society (class) becoming doctors and businessmen, thereby indicating the withdrawal from professions based on family heritage and feudalism. Besides garnering adulation from writers including Sundara Ramasamy (2019) and Ambai (1984), this work is considered integral in constituting the canon of Tamil literature. Appraised by the renowned Czech scholar Kamil Zvelebil as “the first realistic picture of a Tamil Christian community”, this novel is overlooked in critical and academic discussions (288). On the other hand, the early 2000s witnessed the emergence of female poets dealing with a range of issues such as body writing, female pleasure, civil wars and landscapes.<sup>1</sup> Belonging to such a tradition of female imagination, Salma’s works can be seen as a product of pure feminist consciousness. Anita Roy, an editor from *The Guardian*, heaps praise on Salma as “a female Muslim writer in India is a rarity; one who writes with such frankness about sex and sexuality is even rarer. On top of this, being an active and respected politician and social activist makes Salma unique” (Salma, *The Curse Stories*). The indelible marks that these two writers left through a deft fusion of aesthetics and politics are evident from the critics’ appraisals of them.

The very idea of historical contextualization becomes a key factor in apropos of dealing with socialization. The colonial encounter reassembled the patriarchies in India in a way that was inimical to the interests of middle-class women (Chakravarti). The anti-colonial nationalist ideology propounded an ideal womanhood that fed directly into the formation of the middle class during the social reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Srilata 312). It should also be noted that Salma and Jesudasan belong to middle-class families and their semi-fictional works often reproduce characteristics pertaining to this class, where women are saddled with the expectation of adhering to certain appropriate behavioural patterns under the ruse of guarding the family/ community’s honour.

The process of socialization that conditions one's behavioural attitudes works on the principles of "unconscious forces, cognitive schemas and observational learning" (Liss et al. 228). Fundamentally built on the axis of interdependence over kinship and caste fraternity, socialization in India evolves through a natural inclination to be a part of the group and family (Panda and Gupta). Unlike the Western counterpart, in which individualism thrives, India shares a symbiotic relationship between the self and society. In relation to this, the negation of overarching social bindings in Western societies enables them to view menarche only as a "private event that is treated as a hygiene crisis" (Marvan and Alcalá-Herrera 29). Considering the positionality of women in a society like India, which is based on interpersonal relationships, the semantic implications underlying the event of girls "coming of age" resists being seen only as a natural biological process (Thapan). The seismic changes produced by menarche in girls' lives in India offer immense scope for research. Specifically, in the context of Tamil Nadu, women are integral in preserving kinship ties, and hence research on menarche, an event which possesses a transformative potential, assumes pivotal significance. The custom of curtailing girls' mobility by confining them to their houses once they attend puberty is considered *Irserippu*. It was followed popularly in Tamil societies from the Sangam age till the colonial period, which is rather proved axiomatic from Jesudasan's narrative. Girls' puberty function or *Manjal/Pooppu Neeratu Vizha* in Tamil society, irrespective of one's religion, is perceived as a celebration of womanhood and a way of announcing to society the girls' eligibility as a potential bride. Except for the recent Tamil web series *Ayali*, which alludes to the ideological undercurrents akin to *Irserippu*, the complexities around menarche are not overtly discussed in the field of Tamil media and literature. Since the present study intends to locate Jesudasan and Salma's contribution in the broader feminist discourse, it refrains from incorporating movies.

It is appropriate to examine the definition of *Irserippu* and the *Purdah* rituals before delving into its gendered specificities. Jesudasan's tacit reference to *Irserippu* in the narrative captures the patriarchal schema of curtailing women; she describes the practice as "confining young women to the house is an ancient Tamil custom...She (Lizzy) has come of age. She has taken to wearing half-sari. So, confining Lizzy to the house is of utmost importance" (Jesudasan 29)<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, Hanna Papanek (1973) observes the system of *Purdah* as "an important part of the life experience of many South Asians, both Muslim and Hindu", and she complicates it further by arguing that "Muslim seclusion begins at puberty" (289). The segregation of facilities and separation of both men and women in both public and private spaces is precisely what defines the dictates of *Purdah* (Chakroborty 277). Thus, the post-menarcheal sexist socialization that mandates the imprisonment of girls is evidently the common thread that ties the two aforementioned concepts. At this juncture, it is essential to note that both writers employ the "half-sari" as a sartorial marker of puberty in girls. Also, in mandating the homosociality of spaces, such cultural practices engineer gender bigotry. The deliberate familiarisation and assimilation of the mentioned customs make it almost impossible for an individual to remove oneself from this sexist matrix without being accused of being an outcaste. Along with the homosocial dictates of caste, yet another key factor in determining one's social location according to the aforesaid custom is class. Given the precondition of demarcated spaces, the capital becomes a crucial quotient. The retainment of property and the regulation of cash flow enable men to create a conducive atmosphere for homosocial practices, advertently ensuring the static immobility of women. Now, the question arises regarding the mobility of women from the margins and their take on the maintenance of moral codes, honor and homosocial customs. In trying to make sense of convoluted homosocial-spatial customs, the present article intends to analyse the following: how does a mundane biological event dictate the subjectivities of women and in such cases, how does the seamless transaction of gender typing occur? how does the politics of class materialize in the texts, and what are the ways it affects the formation of middle-class moralities? Given the uniqueness of such a social setting, what are the ways in which sexist practices are popularised and adopted?

### The Dynamics of spatiality and socialization

The right conduct of Tamil women, in general, is often premised on their maintenance of the “premarital virginity and post-marital chastity” (Wadley 153–170). In her edited volume, *The Powers of Tamil Women*, Susan S. Wadley observes that the “puberty rites in Tamilnadu are concerned with controlling female energies” (161). More importantly, the bindings that these rites mandate are the girls’ restriction to the house and the indispensability of internalizing self-control, thus conveniently enforcing the sexist surveillance. (161) These physical and psychological restraints laid on women constitute the “nested set of social interiorities” ensuring the continuance of patriarchy (Nakassis 253). Being the product of this culture and upbringing, Salma and Jesudasan bear witness to social evil and critique society to bring about discernible developments.

The front portion of the house that “flanks the entrance and opens on two sides” is referred to as *Adichukootu* in Jesudasan’s novel (173). This part of the house serves as the structural embodiment of the gender status quo maintained in the *Putham House*. Due to the privilege quotient attached to this specific spatiality, it is frequented only by Kannapachi. Since Lizzy is his only companion and his failing eyesight necessitates Lizzy to read him newspapers and the Bible, she earns the freedom of stepping at *Adichukootu* even after hitting puberty; however, only in the absence of men. All the other women, including Lizzy’s mother, aunt and grandmother, are restricted from here, as they are aware of their place in the house. The sprawling vestibule territorialised by Kannapachi gives him a sense of visibility, due to which he monitors and moderates the visitors’ entry into the house. Moreover, this impinging presence of patriarchy foregrounded by the principles of *Irserripu* functions to invisibilise and deterritorialise women even within the premises of their household. A similar scenario can be spotted in Salma’s novel as she candidly conveys the plight of the teenager, Wahida as,

She had never come within sight of men outside the family, nor had she looked at them. When visitors come to the house, they always pressed the bell. On the instant she heard it, she would take to her heels and hid inside her room. It was not in this house alone that this happened. In every house in the village, girls who had come of age ran and hid in exactly the same way (112).

The passage structurally conveys the monotonous uniformity of the lives of girls in the village. The narrative that started with the life of Wahida seamlessly encompasses the lives of all the girls. In doing so, it shows how the practice of *Purdah* adeptly demarcates for them an identity that stands out for its homogeneous categorization. Here, the tone of indifference employed by the omniscient narrator is strategically incorporated to indicate the villager’s way of normalizing such a social practice. Similarly, on Ramzan’s eve, all the women in the village were seen to be in fine dresses, sharing a few moments of friendly banter. Salma narrates the scenario as “the whole street reverberated with wave upon wave of women’s voices and laughter. But this would last only until the men returned to the town” (166). Here, the idea of “street” becomes a metaphor for women’s post-marital chastity that mandates them to be within their allocated quarters in the presence of men. (145–158). The homosocial matrix of spatiality exposes the stark disparity in the gender equilibrium besides confirming the affective relational quality of heteronormativity, stringent homosociality and sexual codes (Hammarén and Johansson). In this connection, both the novels utilize a mundane object like a window, especially windows shielded with curtains, as a means of women’s gateway to the world outside. The presence of shadowy figures against the curtains is markedly featured in their stories, thus reiterating women’s shrinking presence and their lack of autonomy. Such detailing by the authors emphasizes the insouciant way in which the depersonalization of women such as Lizzy’s mother, aunt, and Wahida, among other women, occurs uninterruptedly under the mentioned social practices. On the other hand, the reckless encounters and freedom of mobility in the lives of men such as Thangaraj, Vaidiyar, Sayyed, and Sikkander, among others, validate how “space and gender are not innocent of each other but intimately intertwined” (Datta 156). Their sexist socialisation and territorial politics are further foregrounded by cultural adages, like, “If boys are kept inside the

house, they'll get spoiled. If girls are allowed outside of the house, they'll get spoiled." The post-pubertal female imprisonment is not merely confined to women's physical restrictions and static mobility, as the cultural norms subject them to heterosexual marriages, thus retaining the structural power of heteronormativity. Given the spatial-cultural dynamics of pubertal implications in the lives of girls, it is now crucial to understand the trajectory of such patriarchal paradigms due to which women perform certain gender-essentialist behaviours.

### **Morality as the determinant of gender roles**

The middle-class morality, which gained momentum in the early nineteenth century, had discernible impacts on the workings of gender in India. Identifying the merging of "the nineteenth century Tamil and Victorian morality", which modified the indigenous norms of gender, Sita Anantha Raman proclaims, "the spread of Victorian notions of female domesticity, suppressed sexuality, and middle-class gentility drove upper-caste women even deeper into their courtyards" (106). This argument corresponds with the condition of women depicted by Salma and Jesudasan as the authors, and most of the key characters hail from middle/intermediate-class/caste backgrounds. With relation to this, the ability to afford separate quarters for both sexes, which amplifies the continuance of *Irserippu* and the *Purdah* system, is often suggestive of one's reputed financial and social status. The narrator in Jesudasan's novel, for instance, comments, "First of all, you must understand that Lizzy belongs to a *respectable family*. The pride of Panaivilai Putham Veedu. So, it *doesn't become of her to step out of the house*" (29) (added emphases). A similar narrative parallel can be drawn with the portrayal of adolescent girls such as Wahida, Farida and Rabia in Salma's novel. The boundaries placed on women via veiling, seclusion, and restricted interaction constitute the 'honour' of their family/community (Still 93). Even as the authors expose the hypocrisy of middle-class moralities, they tacitly suggest the gender dynamics implicit in the lives of women across the caste/class hierarchy. In doing so, they depict how middle-class women's need for the outside world is often vicariously experienced through lower caste-class women hired as maids. However, sometimes, the need for satiation of such experiential demands entails exploitation and oppression. In connection with this, Salma passingly mentions the "two tumbler system", which is still active in some parts of Tamil Nadu. The socially despicable practice of allocating separate tumblers for Dalits denotes a clear form of caste discrimination and untouchability. Salma's critique of women normalizing caste-based inequality can be discerned from Nafiza and Zohra's conversation about Mariyayi. Mariyayi, a domestic labour from a marginalized background, is also the concubine of Zohra's husband, Karim. While Nafiza queried about the usage of utensils given to Mariyayi, Zohra cautiously answered that she reserves a "special steel plate and tumbler" for Mariyayi, precisely implying untouchability (Salma 82). On the other hand, discrimination in Jesudasan's narrative involved a merger of caste and class. Although both Lizzy and Pethi, the domestic help, belong to the same community, their need for capital and the strife for it are divergent. Lizzy is from the subject that owns land and mansions, while Pethi hails from a different subject where people pursue toddy tapping for a living. The settled economy of Lizzy is contrasted against the dwindling economy of Pethi's class, which relies on daily wages. Pethi being the only medium for the women of the house to know the world, they were upset when she left Panaivilai. Jesudasan wryly captures the women's turmoil as, "henceforth, who would go to the market? Who would fetch water from the village well? Who would bring them all the village gossip from time to time?" (47). Despite revealing the families' privilege and prejudice in issues regarding mistreatment and exploitation, this episode hints at the mobility that Pethi enjoys and its lack in the lives of the women in the house.

Lizzy and Wahida's internalization of moral codes safeguards them from being at the receiving end of the male gaze. Women serving as custodians of sexism is apparent here, as their interpellation is a result of the normalised gender bigotry passed on to them from the women of previous generations, specifically mothers. The careful utilization of socialization as an instrument for the perpetu-



ation of rigid cultural and social norms rather becomes apparent. Here, the trajectory of the mother's ideology can be further tracked to their cognitive schema of traditional sex roles, which encourages them to promote a "system of sexual apartheid" (Jeffery 103). The root cause of this behavioural pattern is seen to be related to the model of son preference, which is still alive in many parts of South and East Asia, where girl children are considered to be a burden and financial liability (Lindsey 92). Referring to a girl after puberty as "an inferno in the stomach" is a common expression in Tamil Nadu. The pressure of keeping girls in the house in their post-menarcheal stage resulted in a withdrawal from education, and is evident from the plight of girls such as Lizzy, Rabia, and Wahida. The guileful stratagem by paternalistic men to inhibit the education of girls defines their motif of suppressing women's mobility. Even as the pubertal norms curb women's mobility to their houses, it warrants the need to keep them away from attaining independence and subjecthood by prohibiting their education.

Irrespective of it being a knotty issue, it is essential to state the fact that women sometimes institutionalise biological determinist principles and perpetuate them only to ensure the continuation of the conventionalist codes. Not so often is this a case in the lives of women from marginal backgrounds, which is intriguing and demands to be studied. The prescriptive proclivities of middle-class women to uphold the retrograde customs taint their identity as they become guardians and agents of patriarchy. Ismail wins Amina in marriage through a game of cards with her father, Kani Rowther. Besides having reservations about Sikkander's personality, Kader gives his daughter, Wahida, to him in marriage in order to maintain kinship ties and retain the family's properties. Although there were mild protests from the girls' mothers, they gave in to their husband's decisions eventually. These women who are sensible enough to predict the dangers of their daughters' marriage, however, refrained from taking any action. Women's self-effacing behaviour, in turn, is reflective of their anxiety to preserve their social stability attained through heteronormative marriage and to upkeep the honour of their community. However, an alternate scrutiny of the narrative may perhaps interpret the social construct of marriage as a legitimate expression of hegemonic power relations informing patriarchy. As argued earlier, such constraints are shaped by middle-class concerns with moral rectitude. However, the section of women pushed to inhabit the social periphery are, by and large, not constrained by such ethical stipulations. Strategically staying outside the dictates of marriage, Fatima, a domestic helper and single mother from a marginalised background, pursued her relationship with Murugan, a shop employee. In a way, her identity embodies the semiotics of "killjoy feminism" due to her unwavering recalcitrance of kowtow to the sanctioned codes (Ahmed 35). The conversation between Sherifa, a widowed single mother and Fatima substantiates my argument. Hinting at Fatima's liaison with Murugan, Sherifa reminds her about their community's reputation and her duty as a mother, to which Fatima retorts, "Why do I have to safeguard their honour? If something gives me pleasure, I'll go for it. Besides, I'm not a wealthy woman like you, Amma, to renounce everything and sit in a corner for the sake of the family's honour" (Salma 250). Realizing her shunned social location, who receives only pity from fellow women "a slight envy of Fatima's independence sprouted, and then began to take root quickly" in Sherifa (251). The lives of women in terms of gender roles have been structurally nomativized through the cultural dictates of middle-class morality, as they keep them away from the need for social emancipation. To reiterate, the liberties enjoyed by Fatima stem from her lower societal stature, as the codes of modesty and shame via *Purdah* are specifically imposed on upper and middle-class (ashraf) Muslim and Hindu women (Tignol 2). The idea of having a dialogue between divergent women's experiences while highlighting the hypocrisy of patriarchal codes becomes possible by engaging with phenomenological dialectics. Critiquing the dormant state of gender disparity and women's passive acceptance of benevolent sexism, the writers seem to suggest the need to have constant exposure and familiarisation with feminist pedagogy to ameliorate the condition of women from such unjust ties.

### Paternalism driven via gender typing

A holistic analysis of the workings of gender as reflected in the texts will remain incomplete if the article does not factor in the ways, it is preserved and circulated. The dynamics of cultural constituents that shape gender typing in India are premised upon the symbiotic overlapping of the subjects' mutual dependency and their emotional intimacy. A strangely inter-dependable bond demonstrates the dyadic relationship shared between men and women, primarily driven by power, concern and control. While men depend on women to maintain their moral and ethical standards, women are forced to rely on men for affairs regarding finance and decision-making. Since hostile expressions of sexism might evoke resistance, men engage in a seemingly credulous way by inculcating sexist stereotypes under this type of 'protective paternalism', which is all the more insidious (Dardenne et al. 775). Interestingly, the pubertal rites are built on this principle of dominance that can be succinctly defined as "an iron fist in a velvet glove". At this juncture, it is important to trace the strategic nexus between paternalism, the seclusion of sexes and the polarised division of labour (Devi and Kaur; Nasreen). The benevolent paternalists in the fictional worlds of Salma and Jesudasan can be seen as conveniently exploiting women's bodies and labour by keeping them unaware of their exploitation. Women's unpaid household chores in the *Putham House* in relentlessly collecting the *akkeni* or the fresh palmyra sap matches the back-breaking labour that women like Rahima and Zohra perform by cooking on a large scale. For instance, despite fasting, Zohra and Rahima are portrayed as slogging within the asphyxiating walls of their kitchen by preparing food only to eat after the men of the house. Troubled witnessing the withered state of her mother and aunt, Rabia questions the need for such arduous labour; here, the reply given by Zohra clearly illustrates women's unwitting endorsement of patriarchy, as she said, "We have to cook idiappam for the men to eat when they break their fast, don't we?" (Salma 8). Even as they deny the value of their labour, women are seen to be valorising men as they offer them social and financial stability. It is in the revelation of these quotidian details of life, Salma problematizes the idea of benevolent sexism driven by paternalism. This interpellated condition of women who are under the clutch of sexism results from the patriarchy's tactic of capitalizing on women's emotions and sentiments along with their obedience (Mill). Both the writers effortlessly expose the disorientation of women's personalities by sardonically jibing at their self-abnegating attitude. It is due to the ideological cocoon where men define their discriminatory actions as benevolent, women unwittingly often end up as custodians of traditional sex-role theories and, hence, the difficulty in distinguishing dominance from love (Jackman 87).

Another way the paternalist protocols are made a social norm is through the employment of stereotypes. Stereotypes are bluntly defined as mental shortcuts in social psychology (Ahler and Sood). However, gender stereotypes possess deeper meanings as they easily impact and shape one's perception in understanding one's role or the kind of contribution one makes to society. These gender schemas are generally inculcated through daily conversations under sexist socialization. While traipsing through dried leaves on the road, Rabia, who is in her early teenage, is reminded of the reproachment she would receive in her mother's presence, and she instantly mends the way she walks. Rabia's instant realization and rectification of the way she walks reiterate the relative quality of the interpellated mind and body. The affectivity of the cultural memory in training the somatic response as performed through gender typification is thus vividly clear. The embodiment of the essentialist codes by women not only conditions their wishes but also cognitively conditions them to justify the bigoted practices. For instance, the authors lay bare women's problematic obsession with fair skin. Natasha Shevde traces the origin of this notion of 'fair is beautiful' to the advent of the caste system and argues that this fascination was further fuelled during British rule in India. Jesudasan's narrative depicts how Lily's fair skin is perceived to be beautiful as against Lizzy's dusker texture, which is made fun of even by her uncle. The very fact that only girls and women were subject to such skin-tone specifications further elucidates the politics of gender ramifications. Finally, in *The Hour Past Midnight*, after discovering the liaison between Firdaus, a divorced young woman in her twen-

ties, and Siva, a married tenant in Firdaus' house, the first question that Wahida hurls at Firdaus is, "How can you call yourself a woman!" (Salma 382). Albeit the fact that the affair involved both Siva and Firdaus, Wahida's anger is directed at Firdaus, which distinctly unmasks her traditional cognitive policing. It further compels us to question what exactly this "unbecoming" of a woman is. It is rather imperative to ponder on the possibilities that could have indeed compelled Wahida to accuse Firdaus. Is it because of Firdaus's exercise of agency that violates the conventional norm? Or is it because of Firdaus's venture to experience what is traditionally coded as the forte of men, the desire for bodily pleasure? Or is it due to Firdaus' insensitivity to the backlash effects of rigid stereotypes, which mandate punishment for people trespassing its order? The absolute intolerance towards women transgressing this gender typing phenomenon is symbolically conveyed through the death of Firdaus and Fatima, as they attempted to pursue their desire, leading to their jeopardised 'chastity'. Thus, the socially reflexive novels capture women's suffering directly stemming from the functioning of their bodies, which in the case of the study is puberty. In doing so, it illustrates how such customs reduce women's identities, referring them only through their relational terms with men.

### Conclusion

Albeit the fact that *Irserippu* and the rituals of *Purdah* have become defunct now, the traces of it still permeate and dictate the codes of gender. Research on such practices, in turn, aids in comprehending the contextual corporeal reality of men and women. In doing so, the article has tried to argue how domestic spaces become sites for the hierarchical delineation of gender roles by reflecting on broader political structures that mould society. By highlighting the changes, the writers have envisioned for society, the article concludes that the writers' narrativization of the gendered seclusion intrinsic to the post-menarcheal phase is a way of reiterating the importance of women's agency, mobility and education. The complexities following menarche, the post-menarchal seclusion, and its associated politics of gender typing could have been avoided in Tamil society if girls were allowed to "surpass puberty, like the boy, towards a free adult future" (De Beauvoir 778). Finally, the study has also examined the intricate overlapping of the personal and the political in Hephzibah Jesudasan and Salma's works as they codify the private spheres like home, as the microcosm of society. In doing so, they have stressed upon the indispensability of the domestic sphere as an integral constituent in the cultivation of gender equality and feminism. The narrative divergences in their works, with regard to the portrayal of gendered dichotomies, show the multi-textured nature of the trajectory of feminism. Perhaps the observation made by Doireann Ní Ghríofa finds fitting in this context: "This is a female text, written in the twenty-first century. How late it is. How much has changed. How little" (5). Through the writing of local realities and regional customs, the authors claim a place of their own in the broader feminist conversations. More importantly, in acknowledging and assessing such isolated instances of gender progressiveness, a holistic picture of feminism emerges.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The poems of women poets like Malathi Maithri, Salma, Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani are anchored in the politics of sexuality and language. In 2003, the ‘guardians’ of the pristine Tamil culture staged a public protest condemning the works of these poets besides indicting them on grounds of obscenity. Produced by the school of media and cultural studies, Tata Institute of Social Science and directed by Anjali Monterio and K P Jeyasankar, the documentary, ‘She Write’ captures the repercussions that the women poets faced on the grounds of censorship. Lakshmi Holmstrom edited and translated the poems of these poets under the title, *Wild Girls Wicked Words* in 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> The Sangam literature abounds with references to ‘Irserripu’. Instances can be drawn from ‘Nattrinai’, ‘Agananooru’, and ‘Kurunji Pattu’. Read more, <https://ta.vikaspedia.in/education/ba4baebbfbb4bcd-ba8bc2bb2bcd95bb3bcd/குறிஞ்சித்-திணைப்-பாடல்கள்>

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# Revisiting Oral Travel Narratives and the Egyptian Circumnavigation of Africa: A Decolonial Approach

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into the historical nuances of travel narratives, shedding light on the marginalisation of oral traditions within the broader travel writing tradition. Despite the temporal precedence of African travel narratives, they are often relegated to a belated and marginalised status within the travel writing genre, inextricably bound to colonial influences. The primary objective of this paper is to contribute to the decolonisation of the travel writing genre by scrutinising and validating the veracity of an oral travel account documenting one of the most disputed circumnavigations of Africa by ancient Egyptians. Through a thorough examination of historical evidence and sources, this research seeks to establish the factual basis of the Egyptian circumnavigation, thereby reshaping the narrative and affording oral traditions their rightful place in the annals of travel literature.

**Keywords:** Travel Writing, Decolonisation, Africa, Egyptians, oral traditions

## Introduction

The attitude of members of an oral society toward speech is similar to the reverence members of a literate society attach to the written word.

– Jan Vansina

Jan Vansina, a leading historian and anthropologist, in his seminal works on orality and oral traditions, has observed that African civilisations widely relied on oral traditions to record and transmit all the significant knowledge concerning political, legal, social and religious. Nevertheless the scholars, such as Ruth Finnegan, has also observed that since oral traditions ‘do not neatly fit into the familiar categories of literate cultures’, therefore, the oral traditions are less appreciated as compared to written cultures (Finnegan 1). This underpins the attitudes of the societies with written literary traditions to undervalue the aptitude of oral cultures in amassing, structuring, disseminating, and perpetuating knowledge. The skepticism arises from the constrained understanding of the written literary traditions about the intricacies of knowledge production and communication (Nunn 3–6). This propels and furthers the image of oral cultures as void of any literary traditions at all. That is why, even though Achille Mbembe has observed that ‘the cultural history of the [African] continent can hardly be understood outside the paradigm of itinerancy, mobility and displacement’ (Mbembe 27), still the tradition of indigenous African travel writing is considered belated and marginalised.

Building on both the travel writing scholarship and historical value of oral traditions, this paper studies the most controversial first circumnavigation of Africa commissioned by the Pharaoh Necho II or Nekau II of the twenty-sixth Egyptian dynasty reigning from 610 to 595 BC (Shaw 480–82). The only source of information about this circumnavigation is *The Histories* by Herodotus, who has penned down the story after listening from the indigenous poeple. However, this written document is also questioned by the historians, anthropologists, and cultural studies scholars because of the ‘unreliable’ oral source of information for Herodotus’s knowledge about the circumnavigation.

Travel writing scholarship has thoroughly recognised the ability of travel writers to distort the truth—‘amplifying their observations, claiming credit for what they never witnessed or inventing fabulous narratives from their imagination’ (Carey 3). Nonetheless, in the case of travel narratives produced during the period of antiquity, William Hutton, has cautioned the readers against seeking a firm distinction between ‘fictional’ and ‘non-fictional’ accounts. According to Hutton, even the most ‘reality-based narratives’ are loaded with literary allusion, authorial role play and imagination (Hutton 101). Therefore, I am not propositioning the actuality of the story of this circumnavigation, rather I am recommending the vitality of the oral tradition in rewriting the history of African travel writing from decolonial perspective. I propose, that this tale should also be tested similarly as other travel narratives are considered to be ‘fictional’ or ‘non-fictional’ based on their supporting evidence, such as geographical, historical, cultural, political and capabilities of the travellers.

### Overlooking Oral Travel Narratives, Colonising Travel Writing

The ancient Egyptians are known to have gone up the Nile until the point of confluence in search of the source of the river Nile, hence undertaking possibly the first exploration to the interior of Africa, and beyond (Cary and Warmington 158). The exploration activities undertaken by non-European entities in the African interior and along its coasts were initially preserved within the oral traditions of African societies. Subsequently, these accounts were relayed to ancient scholars, notably Herodotus, who transcribed them into written documentation. Nonetheless, due to the absence or lack of written travel accounts by African explorers themselves, the stories of these explorations were discredited by the European explorers and Western scholarship. Due to their roots being embedded in oral literary tradition, the historians, geographers and other literary scholars labelled these ancient explorations as ‘alleged’ or ‘pretended’, thereby eliminating any chance of verifying these historical records and subsequently diminishing traditional explorations into the realm of ‘myth’ (Webb). Consequently, the authority of Egyptians as pioneers of African exploration was annulled thereby ‘erasing centuries of pre-colonial history, contact, and travel across Africa’ (Thompson). This created the African exploration as a blank space to be filled by the Victorian explorers through the myth of discovery.

Tabish Khair, in his introduction to *Other Routes: 1500 years of African and Asian Travel Writing*, explains in detail the ‘myth of discovery’ and its impact on the colonial forces as well as the colonised. Khair demonstrates, through the example of Angkor Wat, a regularly visited Buddhist temple, the way western explorers constructed a myth of a blank space to be mapped and named by the European discoverers (Khair). The pre-colonial question of who mapped the world first was phenomenally influential in making the face of the world and deciding the superior race. The multiple European expeditions sent and their written documentation of the geographical and ethnographical knowledge of the world enabled the Europeans to, predominantly, be acknowledged as the discoverers and the knowledge precursors of the geography.

The interplay of power, knowledge, and authenticity has its roots in the historical context of the Grand Tour. This tradition, originating in the sixteenth century, obligated young men of privilege and means to embark on a comprehensive journey across Europe. The purpose was to gain a profound understanding of history, architecture, and geography, and to document these experiences in writing (Fussell 129). Consequently, this practice conferred authenticity and a sense of superiority upon these travellers compared to the other travellers and travelleses. This concept of authenticity, along with intellectual ascendancy, took root in European society, especially among those who undertook the Grand Tour. As a result, when these travellers ventured beyond the borders of Europe, journeying to distant places like Africa, they were perceived as individuals of high social standing, possessing intellectual acumen and moral rectitude, often sponsored by wealthy patrons. Consequently, the documents they generated, including letters, writings, and personal accounts, were accorded a status of authenticity and originality. The momentum of this trend was further

propelled by the Victorians, who, through their narratives emphasising exceptionalism, consolidated the authority of Euro-imperial powers. They achieved this by establishing and validating the myth of discovery, reinforcing their position of supremacy in the global context (Hibbert 13).

The advent of the printing press further facilitated the travel writing genre to construct and circulate the myth of discovery, which emblematised the stereotypical labels: European travellers' society as an enterprising and inquisitive society, while the other as its antithesis (Mancall 5; Gruesser). A recurring image of black people as 'lazy, ignorant and uncontrollable,' contrasted with the 'compassionate, kind, and enterprising' white explorers in European, specifically British, travel writing (Brantlinger 166). The volumes of travel narratives produced in the colonial era ascertained that these civilised, courageous, brave, committed, cultured and knowledgeable white British travellers (Jeal) were travelling everywhere despite the threats and hitches. Not only were these hegemonic discourses further used to 'justify colonialism as the control of wild and savage people by the civilising forces of European culture', but also to belittle the significant role played by the African companions in these European expeditions (Holloway and Hubbard 135; Garrett; Fabian). Since the African auxiliary was not keeping any written records of their travel stories, therefore, to reduce them to the footnotes in the white man's travel writing became rather convenient. This all concluded in a stereotypical image of a white man passing the difficult terrains to explore and discover the unknown land. This described Western society as enlightened, inquisitive and enthusiastic about solving the mysteries of the world; and the non-western culture as dark, ignorant and passive. This myth, and its written versions, has not only helped imperial projects but has also deprived African people of any claim to knowledge and power. The commemorating sites, such as Victoria Falls and Mount Stanley, in Africa on the names of the European discoveries speak a lot about colocalization of experience, the lost African history and its heroes. The myth of discovery, largely based on ignoring the indigenous oral traditions, enabled to play into the trope of exceptionalism in order to create and exploit the idea of 'blank spaces', to further construct the image of 'dark continent' waiting for a light from outside. This enabled European explorers to colonise the physical as well as the literary landscape of African continent.

The transition of the oral traditions of ancient explorations from history to mythology, and employment of myth of discovery through written history was neither spontaneous nor explicit Western collusion. It can be suggested that the scarcity of ancient to medieval written records played a pivotal role in the rhetorical strategy of travel writing, effectively stripping Africa and its inhabitants of historical context. This, in turn, enabled European authors within the genre to disregard and erase journeys that fell beyond the confines of Eurocentric narratives (Cary and Warmington 8, 15). Also, the Western scholars and explorers, due to peripheral understanding of oral traditions and due to imperial aspirations, negated this authority of ancient explorers. Their explicit rejection of the oral narratives, by either questioning them on a very narrow gauze and testing them according to their own set of belief or by rejecting them on the basis of lack of evidence, erased all the memories and evidence of non-European travels to Africa for European audience. Though the recent developments in the fields of African textualities, literary traditions and history of literature has started focussing on the oral traditions as well. Nonetheless, as Finnegan has rightly observed that even those scholars who still tend to believe in the indigenous oral traditions are influenced by the assumptions about the nature of literary activity among non-literate peoples, which uphold the colonial hegemonic stereotypes in postcolonial world:

All in all, there is still the popular myth of Africa as a continent either devoid of literature until contact with civilized nations led to written works in European languages, or possessing only crude and uninteresting forms not worthy of systematic study by the serious literary or sociological student. (Finnegan 26)

The absence or dismissal of oral travel narratives has also contributed in perpetuating and disseminating a similar image of Africa as a continent either lacking any literary tradition around travel

forms until European explorers arrived, or possessing only peripheral understanding of travel traditions (Jones 1–3). West claimed that the continent continued to be a secret to the world until 1788 when the first European expedition ‘discovered’ the continent. Travel writing, therefore, as suggested by Steve Clark, came to be perceived as ‘one-way traffic, because the Europeans mapped the world rather than the world mapping them’ (Clark 3). To decolonise the history of African travel writing, I propose, that the oral tradition will need to be evaluated and taken into sincere consideration.

Though the postcolonial travel writing scholars, such as Rebecca Jones and Aedin Ni Loingsigh, has started arguing in favour of considering alternative ways of reading and understanding African travel history, still oral tradition is not being fully explored for its historicity and reliability by the travel writing scholars. In recent developments, Vansina has suggested that history can indeed be extracted from the African oral traditions after careful evaluation of ‘methods of transmission, limitation of material, sources of distortion, literary forms and relationship to other historical evidence (Vansina et al. 155; van Fossen).

### Circumnavigation of Africa

The circumnavigation of Africa, as described by Herodotus, was commissioned by Necho II of the Egyptian dynasty. This particular circumnavigation remains a subject of considerable controversy, primarily because the primary source of its information, *The Histories* by Herodotus, relies only on indigenous oral narratives. According to Herodotus’ account of this monumental feat, the Phoenician mariners embarked from the Erythraean Sea, navigating through the southern ocean. They would anchor at a suitable location each autumn, cultivate a parcel of land, wait for the harvest, and then continue their voyage after reaping the crops. After two years, in the third year of their expedition, they successfully circumnavigated the Pillars of Heracles and returned to Egypt (Macaulay 112).

The narrative of this expedition exclusively resides within the domain of indigenous knowledge contained in myths, folklores, and oral performances. Herodotus, in his capacity as a meticulous historian, conscientiously records the intricacies of this oral history. Throughout his historical works he expresses his reservations about accepting all accounts provided by the local peoples. He approaches this narrative as well with a measure of both belief and skepticism. Relying on his knowledge and assessment of the event’s authenticity, he presents supportive evidence for the notion that the Indian Ocean and Atlantic waters were connected (Cary and Warmington 88). Conversely, he also expresses his skepticism by stating, ‘These men made a statement which I do not myself believe, though others may, to the effect that as they sailed on a westerly course round the southern end of Libya, they had the sun on their right – to the northward of them’ (Macaulay 307). Though, Herodotus’ skepticism has since been addressed and resolved by geographers, who have corroborated the accuracy of the accounts provided by his sources. Nonetheless, his deliberate and strategic stance as an external observer of historical records, combined with an awareness of indigenous oral traditions for recording, conveying, and preserving their history, renders, as rightly observed by Cheikh Anta Diop, his accounts suitable for the reconstruction of African history (Diop).

Though Egyptian literary tradition in proto-historical era of African history can be traced through the surviving evidence on papyri, tombs, and stelae, and also the way wisdom genre, transmitted in form of *shoyet* (Instructions from a wise man to his son), has evolved as a complex literary tradition from oral tradition says in itself the extent to which oral tradition has served as the archive of the indigenous African knowledge (Scheub 17). However, as Finnegan, while discussing about the historical narratives and legends as forms of African oral traditions, has pointed towards the problematic assumption ‘that any knowledge of the past must always find expression in a literary form’ (Finnegan 369). This leads to the trap of looking at the knowledge through a limited lens of perceived authenticity. Even though the recent developments in this area has led scholars, such as Rennell, Wheeler and Muller, to reconstruct and authenticate the entire story (Cary and Warmington 93). Still, the scholars, such as Allan B Lloyd and E.J. Webb have rejected the first circumnavigation

of Africa by calling it a myth. They have raised numerous questions on the practicality of the voyage, absence of written evidence, unauthentic sources, impossible distances, and discontinuity in narratives. Out of all these, the absence of any written records left behind by the mariners amplifies the prevailing skepticism surrounding this narrative. Therefore, to reconstruct the history of African travel writing without adapting colonial framework, the scholarship needs to look beyond literary traditions for references. For instance, the evidence of imported exotics and other materials from interior Africa and lands overseas is a significant point to highlight that the Ancient Egyptians were in thorough contact with others. They are known to be importing 'turquoise from Sinai; silver from Anatolia via the Levant; copper from Nubia[,] Sinai and [the] eastern desert; gold from [the] eastern desert and Nubia; fine wood [such] as cedar and products [such] as incense and myrrh from [W]estern Asia and tropical Africa' (Shaw 320). However, the most crucial evidence of their travels to as far as North-eastern Afghanistan is lapis lazuli, a grave bluestone, known to Egyptians as Khesbed (Shaw 313). This stone was used for jewellery, amulets, and figurines from the Nagada II Period that dates 3000 BC. This stone seems to have been located at Badakhshan in northeastern Afghanistan (4000km from Egypt) (Shaw 320). This evidence proves that the Egyptians of 3000 B.C. were already aware of land routes and were travelling to these faraway lands.

Furthermore, as posited by M. Cary, the historiography of ancient explorations should adopt a distinct approach compared to that of ancient and modern discoveries. It is impractical to impose uniform patterns across various temporal epochs and ethnicities. Each historical era is shaped by a unique prevailing ideology, and the motivations for migration or exploration are specific to each racial or ethnic group. The European explorers were exploring and writing their story in the form of letters and reports for a specific purpose, however, these Phoenician sailors have not left anything in written primarily due to the exact opposite reason.

Upon ascending to the throne, Necho II faced a dire military situation on Egypt's northeastern border. The preceding twenty-fifth dynasty had concluded with Egypt severely affected by the Assyrian invasions spanning 671–631 B.C. The advent of the twenty-sixth dynasty brought specific challenges, including a fragmented Egypt, economic fragility, and the threat posed by Asiatic and Nubian rulers seeking to regain control over the land (Alan B Lloyd; A. Lloyd). Psamtek I, cognizant of these challenges, sought to bolster both the military and economic aspects of his reign by 'developing trade links with Greek and Phoenicia' (Bard and Fattovich 270). Hence, it was imperative to foster strong military and economic ties with neighbouring entities. In an effort to facilitate trade and potentially open a maritime route to attack southern Babylonia, Nekau II initiated the construction of a canal that stretched from the delta's Pelusiac branch through the Wadi Tumilat to the Gulf of Suez (Bard and Fattovich 270). This endeavour marked a revival of economic activity in the Red Sea region. However, Necho abandoned the project after a tragic loss of 120,000 Egyptian lives, as legend says, following an oracle's prophecy that only a foreigner would reap the benefits of the canal. Subsequently, the canal's construction was completed by Darius (Redmount 128). The circumnavigation of Africa may be linked to Necho's broader defence initiatives (A.B Lloyd 376). It is plausible to assume that Phoenician involvement in this circumnavigation was a logical choice given their renowned seafaring expertise and shared adversarial relationship with Babylon. Necho II's solicitation of Phoenician assistance and their agreement to undertake the project aligns with this rationale. As it was the inaugural circumnavigation of Africa, it is conceivable that neither the Phoenicians nor the Egyptians possessed accurate knowledge of the African coastal geography. This might have led them to entertain the optimistic notion of finding a route around Africa to launch an attack on Babylonia. It is possible that this circumnavigation was not commissioned with the intent of documenting the journey but rather driven by alternative, more pragmatic motivations. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that once they had completed their exploratory mission, they might have either departed without leaving any inscriptions or stayed in Carthage. Alternatively, they could have been unable to convey their achievements to Necho from where the tale lived in the form of a legend



in oral tradition. The precise date of the expedition remains unknown, and it is conceivable that Necho may have passed away by the time of their return. His successors, preoccupied with safeguarding their borders against external threats, may not have taken a keen interest in the expedition's outcomes. Nevertheless, their experiences were preserved in Egyptian oral tradition, eventually reaching Herodotus.

Also following Vansina's methodology of historiography through oral traditions, this circumnavigation also finds its evidence in written European documents, not in the form of folklore or oral performance. In 1827, George Thompson, a successful merchant, travelling across Africa from Cape Colony to promote his company, wrote his travelogue: *Travels and Adventures in South Africa*. In a footnote, he records a discovery of the timber of a vessel embedded in the sea some years ago, which he was unable to identify, he writes:

...A nautical gentleman, who examined it with more care than I had an opportunity of bestowing, thinks that the wood (which has apparently been buried for ages in the sand) greatly resembles cedar, and conceives it possible that this may be the remains of some ancient Phoenician vessel, wrecked here when our present Cape Flats were under water, forming, perhaps, a shallow strait between Wynberg and the Koeber... Whatever may be in this, Captain Owen seems to have obtained strong evidence of the commerce of the Phoenicians having extended from the Red Sea, much farther down the eastern coasts of Africa than is generally imagine... (Thompson 319)

This travelogue, published in 1827, and as per Thompson's account, the discovery had been made a few years prior to its publication. This signifies that the British were already cognizant of the potential voyages of the Phoenicians to Cape Flats, potentially for commercial purposes. Surprisingly, scholars have seemingly omitted or overlooked this historical context when engaging in debates concerning circumnavigation. While the significance of this discovery may not conclusively justify ancient endeavours, it is an aspect worthy of acknowledgment, particularly when considering its temporal precedence over the Victorian era, an epoch marked by a profusion of enlightenment-driven discoveries. Moreover, it is pertinent to note that this discovery experienced a revival in 1852. Charles Bell, the Surveyor-General, officially requested a sum of twenty pounds through a letter addressed to C.H. Darling, the Lieutenant Governor, and the request received due approval. Some of the excerpts from that letter, as quoted by H.F. Sampson are as follows:

...However extraordinary it may seem, I am compelled to believe that this wood is part of a large vessel upward of some seventy feet in length, wrecked when the sea washed up to some of the ancient beaches on the Lion's Head and now raised some hundreds of feet in height above the present high-water mark and left at a distance of at least 14 miles from the shore... It would be idle to indulge at present in any archaeological speculations. I would merely allude to the accounts which have reached our times of the early circumnavigation of Africa while the pyramids were yet new. The Block cannot be taken as evidence of recent construction, for Blocks are pictured and carved by the ancient Egyptians and Assyrians, and if, solely from position, I advert to the possibility of this being a relic perhaps of the age of Pharoah Necho, and to the care with which of late years the Archaeologists of Europe have collected and classed all that relates to the prehistoric annals of their country, particularly in Norway and Scotland. I do so, only that the chance of some interesting discovery may not be lost. (Sampson 37–38)

The outcome of this archaeological survey and the disposition of the twenty-pound fund remains undisclosed, as inferred from Sampson's article. However, the primary point of significance lies in the ongoing exploratory activities centred around shipwrecks. It is plausible that Charles Bell may have inadvertently associated these shipwrecks with the era of Necho II. Nevertheless, if a comprehensive report on the investigation were available, it would likely dispel any uncertainties by providing a more accurate understanding of the wreckage.

The idea of 'myth' is distinct in Western culture and in African literary culture. There are literary forms such as *hwenoho* (time-old-story) and *heho* (light-hearted tales related to supernatural, human and animals) tradition. However, they are rather overlapping forms of folktale/myth/legend (Finnegan

365). Therefore there is no clear distinctive definition for 'myth' per say. Whereas Western written literary tradition clearly classifies travel writing genre and myth, there is almost no overlap. Also the Mediterranean culture has not produced travel writing as conventionally defined and understood by the Western scholarship. Therefore, the story of this circumnavigation has conveniently slipped into the Western definition of 'myth', which has resulted in overlooking of these specific findings. The varied description of myth, and attitude towards the oral cultures, enables some scholars to question the authenticity of the circumnavigation based on their presumptions and expectations of the race. For instance, Lloyd doubts the circumnavigation based on Egyptian characteristics: he says 'Here we have Egyptian king presented to us, like some philosopher-king, forming the notion of circumnavigating Africa... This would surely have been a psychological impossibility for any Pharaoh... It is doubtful that an Egyptian King would, or could, have acted as Necho is depicted as doing' (Alan B Lloyd 150).

Vansina has proposed methods to test the oral traditions for churning out the closest description of the past of the culture. He has widely focussed on comparative analysis of testimonies with other auxiliary sources of history. Lloyds' doubt, though highly racialised, can be tested through the discovery of the two massive sealed pits, carved into the limestone bedrock of the Giza plateau, in 1954, underneath a pile of debris just south of the Great Pyramid of Giza. These pits seemed to form a part of the funerary complex of the pyramid of King Cheops, the second ruler of the Fourth Dynasty of the Egyptian Old Kingdom. One of the pits preserved the timbers of a 43.m (143.97') funerary vessel (Jenkins 3). This boat seems to have been buried some four and a half millennia earlier, apparently at the same time that King Cheops was buried in his tomb in the heart of the adjacent pyramid (Jenkins 4). In yet another excavation at Wadi Gawasis, the archaeologists have discovered the remains of the oldest seafaring ship. This established that the 'ancient Egyptians were capable of navigating as far as the southern Red Sea region' using ships built with refined technology (Bard and Fattovich). This site of Wadi Gawasis was also established as the Pharaonic harbour used for sea-faring expeditions during the twelfth dynasty based on textual evidence (Veldmeijer et al.). Another 'mythical tale' of Scota, the daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh who married Geytholos, the founder of Scots, after being exiled from Egypt, assist in establishing that the Egyptians might be well trained and technically sound to navigate the waters of North Atlantic sea after passing through the pillars of Hercules, a distance greater than they were travelling overland (Matthews 289).

The Egyptian literary tradition became not only Africa's first but world's first such tradition to manifest a close relationship between orality and written literature. Herodotus, though unknowingly, has acted as a scribe for the local orators of the tale of circumnavigation. The scribes in proto-historical era of Egypt were seen as a disseminator of oral knowledge with an authority to 'rephrase, rearrange and transpose, omit sentences, add information, elaborate on advice, and generally shape the imagery' (Scheub 16). Therefore, the degree of imagination that may have gone into the narration or writing of the tale cannot be ruled out. Still, the degree of authenticity in the story needs to be tested on certain other historical parameters. This enables the travel writing scholarship to revisit and redefine the history of travel writing from decolonial perspective.

## Conclusion

Recently, the travel writing scholarship has started seeking alternative non- Eurocentric ways of reading and approaching the travel texts by non-European societies. However, the oral tradition is yet to receive appropriate attention by the scholarship. This paper, by studying the role of oral tradition in skepticism and reliability of the tale of the first circumnavigation of Africa carried out by the Phoenician sailors, has contributed to this area of knowledge. The study has demonstrated, relying on the archaeological and other historical sources, that the Egyptians were seafaring people travelling to faraway lands as early as 3000 B.C., had technically sound ships to materialise their projects, and also had a reason to circumnavigate Africa. The paper has used this information as a

substantial clue, either affirming or questioning the veracity of the first circumnavigation of Africa in a more informed manner. Therefore, the circumnavigation shall not be discarded as 'alleged' or 'myth'. The paper has not explicitly proposed the authenticity of the event itself, rather it has tried to establish the significance of oral traditions in writing the literary histories of the societies without formal written culture as understood by the Euro-centric knowledge structures. The paper demonstrates that the oral traditions can be utilised to decolonise the history of travel writing genre.

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# No Shortcuts to Posthuman Utopia: Religion, Technology, and Society in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*

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**Abstract:** While many scholars draw on Deleuzian vital materialism to make the case for the ethical being of posthuman existence, there is a need to address the implications of completely relinquishing human agency. The posthuman utopia seems within reach through the transformative potential of technology, but what happens when the spiritual human finds himself at the crossroads of embodiment, hybridity, and the implications of transcending human limitations? This merging of the technological and the spiritual raises questions about the nature of religious experience and the potential for alternative modes of transcendence in a posthuman context. This research paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the themes of religion and technology in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, highlighting the nuanced relationship between these domains. I contend in my paper that Ghosh's fiction provides an epistemological and ontological framework that differs from Western positivist approaches to scientific investigation, while avoiding simplistic distinctions. Ghosh's work dives into the cyborg myth, presenting a picture of the future that questions traditional concepts of potential and frees the myth from the limits of a society based on oppressive information systems.

**Keywords:** Posthuman, spirituality, religion, artificial intelligence, Haraway, cyborg

Amitav Ghosh, in his novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery* (1995), explores the latent perils inherent in contemporary scientific advancements. Through his narrative, Ghosh sheds light on the persistent hazards that permeate a futuristic society characterised by emerging technologies and postcolonial cybernetic conflict. The book amplifies apprehensions over the potential of modern technology to incorporate within its consequential framework the myriad dystopian atrocities. The novel is a work of science fiction (SF) that challenges the traditional concepts of human agency and subjectivity through ideas of artificial intelligence, religion, posthumanism, genetics, and bio-information. SF, as a genre, has a troubled relationship with colonial and postcolonial studies. It is often critiqued for propagating imperialistic designs and discourses behind the veneer of westernised rationalism. The responsibility to discover the extent of the imperialistic import in the works of science fiction then lies with the readers. *The Calcutta Chromosome*, a science-fiction work, is often read along the lines of deconstructing colonial designs. According to Nudrat Kamal, the novel “deftly utilises and then subverts science fiction motifs, conventions, and tropes to deconstruct and move beyond the simplistic binary oppositions between the Global North and Global South that underpin colonial ideologies” (13). Many critics have imagined Ghosh constructing a “postcolonial cyborg” to combat the totalisation and universalisation of “western rationality.” In this paper, I argue that this postcolonial cyborg, who subverts and undermines the colonising western scientific community by emphasising the relevance and importance of alternate forms of eastern knowledge, draws its potential from spirituality and religion. Without acknowledging spirituality's visionary tools, the posthuman cyborg of the western imagination and the postcolonial



cyborg of the eastern sensibility would not be able to achieve the promised utopia. By exploring the novel's depiction of spirituality, scientific inquiry, and the consequences of their convergence, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of religion and technology and invites readers to reflect on the implications of this convergence in contemporary society. Furthermore, this paper engages with broader philosophical and ethical implications arising from the fusion of religion and technology, considering issues such as the dehumanising potential of technology and the existential dilemmas posed by scientific advancements, and hence critically engaging with the utopic desires of a posthuman world. It examines the novel's critique of a reductionist worldview and the interconnectedness of human experience, emphasising the importance of embracing complexity and the unknown. The paper begins with an exploration of the scientific and technological elements presented in the story, such as genetic research, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality, analysing their impact on characters and the society they inhabit. It then proceeds to examine the novel's portrayal of religious beliefs and practices, highlighting the role of spirituality, mysticism, and divination within the narrative. It delves into the characters' navigation of the blurred boundaries between the spiritual and the scientific, examining their struggles, quests for meaning, and the consequences of their actions in a posthuman context.

The *Calcutta Chromosome* begins with Antar, an Egyptian employee of the International Water Council, discovering the story of Murugan, a former colleague. Antar chances upon Murugan's ID card on his computer AVA during a routine inventory check and begins investigating Murugan's disappearance in Calcutta in 1995. Antar, with the help of Ava, discovers that Murugan had asked his company to fund his project to study the history of malarial discovery by Ronald Ross, who won the Nobel Prize for his work in 1902. Ghosh then merges the narrative timelines of Antar's twentieth-century world, Murugan's 1990s Calcutta, and Ronald Ross's nineteenth-century British India. Murugan believes that a "counter-science" group nudged Ronald Ross towards his malarial discovery. Mangala, who works as a "sweeper woman" (142) in D.D. Cunningham's laboratory, picks up the malarial research and, using her own methodology of "counter-science" and religion of silence, begins researching on her own. Once she and a group of other natives become involved in the research, she gently encourages Ronald Ross to make the necessary discoveries using his own tools. Ultimately, they discover what Murugan calls the "Calcutta Chromosome." This chromosome allows immortality and the transmigration of souls. The plot then reveals several reincarnated characters—Mangala reincarnates as Tara, Urmila reincarnates as Mrs. Aratounian, and Lutchman, another member of the counter-science group, reincarnates as Romen Halder and ultimately as Lucky.

### Dehumanised Identities

*The Calcutta Chromosome* uses tropes that merge the organic with the machine, the science with the mysticism, and the reality with the imagination. One such trope is the cyborg gaze, in which we witness the dystopian interference of technology in organic life. Antar's computer, Ava, watches her surroundings and reports back to the organisation via her "eye," which is "a laser-guided surveillance camera" (7). Once, Ava finds Antar reading a book at work, and a week later, she informs him about his salary reduction:

Ava didn't notice the first time but it happened again with the correcting fluid: he was reading, staring at the wall when she went deadly quiet. Then suddenly warnings began to flash on his screen. He whisked the book away but she already knew something was up. At the end of the week, he received a notice from his employer, the International Water Council, telling him that his pay had been docked because of "declining productivity," warning him that a further decline could entail a reduction in his retirement benefits. (5)

This cyborg gaze appears to be akin to a panopticon cyberspace, in which machines wield absolute power. Michel Foucault uses the term 'panopticon' to describe how society has shifted from military

and economic control to self-surveillance. He describes how the “panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately” (200). The “supervisor” is able to see “better than darkness”, and “visibility is a trap” (200). The technological panopticon dream of increasing surveillance on citizens through monitors, cameras, and motion sensors is to maintain the dominant order and to sabotage any free-playing discourse. In another instance in the novel, Ava manages to project a live holographic projection of the director of the council, while he is showering. The incredible breach of privacy catches the director in utter disbelief. “When he saw what was happening, his hands flew down to cup his genitals. He began to scream, his voice rising. He began crawling furiously, dripping soap and water on the floor” (239). The panopticon tools, which masquerade as essential safety and reliability measures, actually undermine the assurance of security. The technology, which initially promises to protect citizens, ultimately turns into a tool that dehumanises multiple identities.

The Heideggerian philosophy of technology claims that technology mutates and develops beyond human control and gets in the way of human thinking, which ultimately results in people becoming resources for optimisation. “Again, we ask: Does this revealing happen somewhere beyond all human doing? No. But neither does it happen exclusively *in* man, or decisively *through* man,” he states (24). The dynamics of the relationship that Antar and his computer Ava share, are not far from the Heideggerian philosophy of technology. Antar is not in control of Ava, and he knows it—“He stopped trying to get the better of Ava after that. He went back to his job... wondering what it was all for” (5). Rather, it is Ava that keeps a watch on Antar and controls his actions through surveillance. Antar then becomes an optimisable resource and a dehumanised entity for the corporation he works for.

The panoptican metaphor that *The Calcutta Chromosome* highlights is not the only literary instance where digital society motivates self-determination and constant surveillance. Big Brother in Orwell's *1984* shares the panoptican vision of a society with self-control and surveillance, as does Kafka's *The Trial*, where people have lost any control over their information and are at the mercy of invisible bureaucratic processes at all times. We need to ask ourselves. What does all this mean for a spiritual individual? Would Haraway's cyborg really “not recognise the Garden of Eden” (9)? Would it also fail to “re-member the cosmos” (9)?

Speaking of displaced identities, the novel also explores how artificial intelligence makes fun of accents and cultures that are not part of the hegemonic order. What might be an attempt to create a familiar environment to enhance the efficiency of the employees proves to be a deceitful imitation at most. In the novel, when Antar simply asks Ava the time, Ava resorts to a disingenuous mimicry, “calling out the hour in the style of a village watchman in Egypt, perfect in every detail, down to the tapping of the wooden staff” (19). Ava, in appropriating the time-telling practice in the villages of Egypt, crosses the line between creating familiarity for Antar and mockery of his identity. This mimicry is symptomatic of the power relations that exist between the coloniser and the colonised nations as discussed by Homi Bhabha in his famous essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”. He talks about the role of mimicry in the colonial strategy, which relies on the colonisers' construction of the identity of the colonized. According to Bhabha, mimicry functions as a partial gaze of the coloniser, displacing the observed and thereby “rearticulating the entire notion of identity and alienating it from its essence” (129). For many critics, the western technology in the novel is representative of a neo-colonial, capitalistic patriarchy that exerts its supremacy over the indigenous population. Kamal, in her analysis of the novel, makes a similar argument: “The International Water Council, the megacorporation Antar works for (and is monitored by), signifies a tool for control in the neo-colonial order—an order where corporate empires have replaced colonial ones, where Antar and other non-Western subjects' labour is yoked to the global machinations of corporate enterprise” (204). The cyborg ontology, then, appears to be nothing short of a dystopic science-fiction nightmare in which machines and technology reproduce colonial power

relations and oppress certain identities. Bhabha asserts, “The discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism often speaks in a tongue that is forked, not false. If colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce” (126). The figures of farce in the post-colonial, neo-capitalistic world become the tools of artificial intelligence. By mimicry, mockery, and appropriation of certain identities, it is clear that the posthumanist utopia is not all-inclusive.

Ghosh’s novel depicts a kind of silence that engulfs the lives of the characters. This silence is also the religion of the natives and the “most secret of deities” (33). Many critics have interpreted the novel’s focus on silence as the subaltern reclaiming its voice through “counter-science”. We can understand this religion of silence as a form of solace from the isolation that colonial sabotage of alternative knowledge and the encroachment of technology bring. Multiple characters suffer from this isolation, including Antar, who works from home and gets all his communication from his office through AVA. His wife dies in childbirth, and so he lives alone in his New York apartment. Even though AVA impersonates human voices, it is not enough for Antar, who clearly seeks the relief of the doughnut place, whose owner is also Egyptian. “Antar desires the comfort and familiarity of the doughnut place because the owner of the franchise was an Egyptian, like himself. Not that he missed speaking Arabic—far from it. He got plenty of that all day long, from AVA” (14). Antar yearns for connections beyond artificial intelligence, and the novel provides a reconciliation for that yearning through the religion of silence. The religion of silence that manifests itself in the form of “counter-science” is not only a solace from modern-day technology-induced isolation, but also a form of protest against the totalising science and technology of the west.

Like Antar, Phulboni, a famous author in the novel, searches for and yearns for this reconciliation. In many of his speeches, Phulboni talks about his quest for reunion with the deity of silence: “For more years than I can count, I have wandered the darkness of these streets, searching for the unseen presence that reigns over this silence, striving to be taken in, begging to be taken across before my time runs out” (32). The characters seek community and want the refuge of the *bonhomie* of religion, manifested in the form of silence and “counter-science”. The religion of silence, which guides Ronnie Ross towards the discovery of the malarial parasite, also leads Antar towards immortality. The “counter-science” group of the locals in British India extends their concept of reincarnation and transmigration of souls, a.k.a. the Calcutta Chromosome, and influences the technology of the westerners for the purpose of human evolution. It is clear that the natives are desperate to find their voices, which are muted by the technological isolation and totality. And this voice is found in the religion of silence. The posthumanist utopia, then, not only fails to accommodate the sensibilities that are not part of the hegemonic order but, it also remains unachievable without the knowledge of concepts silenced as savage and unscientific. It is only ironic that the silence that is imposed on the “alternate” forms of knowledge becomes the guiding light and religion for the natives in the novel, which ultimately leads to the discovery of the Calcutta Chromosome, a chromosome that transcends and immortalises human bodies and furthers human evolution.

### Religious Cyborgs

Clive Lawson, in his book *Technology and Isolation*, summarises how Greek philosophers generally held the belief that while technical knowledge is indispensable to human existence, it has inherent negative qualities and potential hazards (4). He gives an example of the stories and myths of Prometheus, Icarus, and the Tower of Babel. He goes on to say that “each of these stories embodies the idea that a preoccupation with technological matters involves a turning away from something good (usually faith in God and nature) and an undermining of individual striving for excellence” (4). An utter belief in the supremacy of western thought soon replaces this ancient scepticism about technical knowledge. Since the onset of the European Enlightenment in the 18th century, individuals from Western societies have consistently had a strong conviction in the notion of human development.

People commonly saw progress as the enhancement of individuals' quality of life. The concept of scientific advancement is commonly perceived as a gradual and iterative process of discovering and comprehending objective truths within the realm of the physical universe. According to Lori Branch, "Perhaps our most paradigmatic text for understanding the tensions between literature and belief in Western cultures is Plato's *Republic*" (11). For her, the parables of the cave and the sun are the quintessential metaphors of western epistemology that set up the stage for the prioritisation of knowledge, or "episteme", maths and sciences, and the "truth" which reflects "what is" in opposition to ignorance or "what is not" (11). With this shift in the perception of "knowledge" and "ignorance", different and various forms of knowing begin to be discarded as backward and savage.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ross exploits the indigenous population in his research endeavours due to the perceived intellectual dominance of science without appropriately acknowledging their significant contributions. In the novel, the indigenous tradition eventually manifests itself as a type of counter-science. This "counter-science" group, whose religion is silence, knows that nothing is an end in itself, and that no form of knowledge entails negation of other forms of knowing. For Murugan, this group:

Maybe...started with the idea that knowledge is self-contradictory: maybe they believed that to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you've already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history. Maybe they thought that knowledge couldn't begin without acknowledging that impossibility of knowledge. (105)

Ghosh constructs the knowledge of the local people, such as Lutchman and Mangala, as something that is aware of the limitations of prioritising one form of knowledge over the other. There is no question about the superiority of western science over local knowledge, but rather how the hybridisation of both brings society closer to the imagined posthuman utopia. This hybridisation of religion and technology is what Ghosh seems to be propagating. According to Nudrat Kamal, "In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh places this tension between rationality and spirituality at the centre of the novel, attempting to move beyond this simplistic dichotomy by questioning whether the two are really so incompatible after all" (13). Spirituality, or "counter-science" in the novel, is the combative ontology towards the determinism of science. This determinism not only promotes a movement away from organic life, but also re-stricts human desires and thoughts, redirecting them to the benefit of the dominant order. I propose that the dismantling of western technological supremacy tropes occurs through the hybridisation of religion and technology in science fiction. The "counter-science" group consisting of Mangala, Lutchman, and others was able to discover the DNA for immortality because Murugan believes "someone who's completely out of the loop, scientifically speaking, would be able to find it—even if she didn't know what it was and didn't even have a name for it" (250). Ghosh, through his science fiction, clearly emphasises how deterministic science is detrimental to furthering knowledge. Only, a discipline like "counter-science" or the religion of silence could have chanced upon such a discovery in Ghosh's fiction. Raymond Williams, addressing the deterministic propensities of technology, said, "How the technology develops from now on is then not only a matter of some autonomous process directed by remote engineers. It is a matter of social and cultural definition, according to the ends sought" (134). In this light, the imperialistic and supremacist attitude of the dominant order is indistinguishable from the technology it seems to promote. Technology is not an autonomous body, but rather an application of science that itself is not immune to biases. "Traditional" and "alternate" forms of knowledge which do not adhere to the western "logos", derive their interpretations of reality in terms of religious, mythical, and metaphysical understanding of the cosmos and society as a whole. Patriarchal capitalism and neo-colonialism adopt the methodology of marginalising these interpretations in favour of "western technology".

Amitav Ghosh seems to be debunking this fascist and colonial supremacy through his postcolonial fiction and the character of Murugan, who seems to be Ghosh's mouthpiece. Murugan, when talking

about Ronald, remarks, “Here’s Ronnie, right? He thinks he’s doing experiments on the malaria parasite. And all the time it’s him who *is* the experiment on the malaria parasite. But Ronnie never gets it; not to the end of his life” (79). Ronnie remains a puppet at the hands of a subterranean Indian organisation led by the enigmatic figure known as Mangala, which had already made noteworthy advancements in this particular area of study, surpassing their European counterparts. The aforementioned group successfully cultivates a distinct strain of malaria that is capable of being grown in pigeons. Murugan first discovers evidence of the activities of this group in the notes of a bacteriologist, Elijah Farley—“From Farley’s account it seems there was an underground network of people who believed that she possessed a cure” (247). One of the primary objectives pursued by Mangala was to investigate a potential remedy for syphilis, a sexually transmitted infection, by means of introducing the malarial microorganism into the patient via avian transmission. But “somewhere down the line Mangala began to notice that her treatment often produced weird side effects” (249). Following an extensive series of tests, Mangala reached an impasse in her research endeavours in the year 1897. Consequently, she felt a pressing need for a capable individual to assume responsibility for the continuation of this project. At this particular juncture, she fortuitously encountered Ronald Ross, a scientist renowned for his association with the identification of the malaria parasite. After a series of futile attempts, she arrived at the conclusion that the current strains of malaria provide a significant obstacle to making any progress in the desired direction. She then purposefully incorporates the essential hints and details into Ross’s mindset and proceeds to tactfully manipulate his experiments in order to influence his behaviour according to her desires. This leads to the discovery of a DNA that Murugan calls “the Calcutta Chromosome”.

Mangala, who leads the “counter-science” group and manipulates Ross into discovering the chromosome, is a living metaphor for a goddess; her name is also an alternative term for Kali or Durga. She represents the religious mythology of Mangala-Bibi. The novel features a reiterative symbol of a clay idol, which we later learn is the idol of Mangala-bibi, a goddess that reincarnates. Thus, in the novel, the cyborgization of corporeal bodies and identities is done through the appropriation of not only science but also religious myths and legends. What is Ghosh trying to achieve through this unique hybridisation, where Mangala is both a metaphor for religious myth and the perpetrator of scientific discoveries? I contend that he does so to offer an epistemological and ontological framework through his fiction that diverges from Western, positivist conceptions of scientific inquiry while simultaneously avoiding the reinforcement of oversimplified binaries of religion and technology. In his work, Ghosh delves into the cyborg myth in order to present a vision of the future that not only challenges conventional notions of possibility, but also liberates the myth from the confines of a society built around repressive and all-encompassing systems of knowledge. Ghosh, through the narrative of Murugan, “shatters the superiority complex of the West through falsifying Ross’ belief in himself as the conductor of the research” (Mishra and Kumar 81).

Ghosh, at multiple points in the novel, gives elaborate details of religious tantric rites. The fiction moves along, intertwining both scientific facts and cult practices in the form of quasi-religious experiments, ultimately resulting in the discovery of “the Calcutta Chromosome”. Sonali, a staff member at the *Calcutta Magazine*, inadvertently witnesses one such experiment, where Lutchman’s soul was being transferred into the body of Roman (Sonali’s boyfriend), by Mangala, who was herself operating within the body of Mrs. Aratounian:

Sonali forced herself to look down again. A figure had come out of the shadows: it was a woman and she was dressed very plainly... She arranged the plates and the scalpel in front of her, on a piece of cloth, and reached into her bag again. She took out a small clay figure and touched it to her forehead, before setting it down beside her... Raising her voice, the woman said to the crows, in archaic rustic Bengali: “The time is here, pray that all goes well for our Laakhan, once again”. (166–167)

Ghosh’s fiction, which hybridises the cyborg myth with the myths of religion, demonstrates that one does not need to choose between the cyborg ontology and religion. Choosing one over the other is



totalising and dismissive and a colonising endeavour nonetheless. The imagery above invokes not only a religious ceremony but also uses scientific tools like “scalpel,” “slides”, etc. Once more, the novel’s exploration of the science–religion hybrid is underscored by the extensive use of Western scientific equipment with Eastern iconic deities.

### Back to the Future: Posthuman Utopia

Pramod K. Nayar, in his book *Posthumanism*, gives multiple definitions that branch out from the concept of posthumanism. He starts by elaborating on transhumanism. According to him, “Transhumanists believe in the perfectibility of the human, seeing the limitations of the human body (biology) as something that might be transcended through technology so that faster, more intelligent, less disease-prone, long-living human bodies might one day exist on Earth” (16). He further elaborates on how this seems like a white man’s fantasy by reiterating the belief in the supremacy of western technology and science. Ghosh too sees through the chimaera of Western supremacist belief and through his science fiction, counters the methodology of transhumanism. His fiction offers a paradigmatic shift in the very concept of transhumanism through different forms of knowing. In fact, the concept of transcendence did not originate from technology or transhumanist vision. Susan George remarks, “Most religions have a similar concept of ‘overcoming’”. Ghosh knows this and tactfully employs quasi-religious experiments to aid Ronald Ross in the discovery of something that was beyond Ross’s imagination. The belief in the hegemony of western knowledge is overturned by a group of “untrained and uneducated” (146) natives through their religion of “counter-science”. The next terminology dealt with in Nayar’s book, *Posthumanism*, is critical posthumanism. “Critical posthumanism calls attention to the ways in which the machine and the organic body and the human and other life forms are now more or less seamlessly articulated, mutually dependent, and co-evolving”, he says (19). Christopher Shinn, in his analysis of Ghosh’s novel, talks about a similar kind of critical posthumanism where technology is an aid to human evolution and does not control organic life:

Ghosh’s novel promotes an alternative conceptual possibility for an understanding of our post-human futures; it posits that the human system computes the machine—not vice versa—into its own evolutionary design. Through the human–computer interface (HCI), the computer acts as a catalyst and a carrier to set in motion a process that furthers the growth of biological and organic life. Ghosh’s novel therefore emphasizes the primacy of evolutionary organicism rather than the quest for cyborg ontology.” (146)

Shinn also invokes Foucault’s “biopower” and tries to reconsider the term as a return to organic life. For him, biopower is not something in which “technology, scientific discourse, and corporate power” (147) overtake sexuality and ultimately result in the annihilation of organic life. Instead, Shinn reimagines biopower as “larger evolutionary processes in which technology does not control nature but nature controls itself” (147). For Shinn, computers only serve as a catalyst for human evolution, which eventually results in the reversal of organic life. Shinn’s arguments are among the many that criticise the interpretations of the novel along the lines of transhumanism, which revels in the supremacy of Western machines and knowledge in a twisted Cyborgian ontology. I concur with Shinn’s arguments because even though, as I mentioned in the first part of my paper, the machines in the novel keep an eye on the people in a panopticon sense and create dehumanised identities, they do ultimately become the instruments for human reincarnation and human evolution. However, I firmly believe that Shinn’s “evolutionary organicism” materialises in the novel only through the hybridisation of technology and religion.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* tells the story of cyborgs who not only dismantle the colonial framework that prioritises western knowledge over indigenous knowledge but also utilise the tools of western technology to further the science of traditional knowledge ultimately resulting in human evolution. Ghosh thus creates a fiction that advances a kind of critical posthumanism which offers the hybridisation of machine and organic life through both technology and religion. Even though

Haraway's cyborg myth "is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (14), she ultimately limits the potentialities of this myth by stating that she would rather be a "cyborg than a goddess" (68). I contend that Haraway's cyborg myth takes many of its utopic idealistic fantasies from the myths, fantasies, and metaphors of religion and spirituality. Haraway's cyborg does not participate in rebirth or reproductive sex but envisions participation in regeneration, into a world that ultimately becomes sexless and genderless because of similar multiple regenerations. Mangala's discovery of the "Calcutta Chromosome" which "is not transmitted from generation to generation by sexual reproduction" (250) is in a way Haraway's cyborg myth that comes true in Ghosh's fiction. The only difference is that this chromosome is found by the religious cult of "counter-science," which utilises the tools of western technology for its research. Haraway is against "anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology" (67), yet her conceptualisation of the Cyborgian myth takes from the metaphors of religion. She considers "the production of universal, totalizing theory a major mistake" (67), and yet calls the dreamer of the cyborg myth a "powerful infidel" (68).

Ghosh's fiction thus becomes an effort towards a paradigmatic shift in posthumanism, an acknowledgement of the hybridity of western science and traditional knowledge to further human evolution. The story critically examines the prevailing notion that the advancement of mankind can solely be achieved through scientific means and provides insights into alternate perspectives and potential avenues for emancipation. By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the narrative is not about machines taking over organic life but rather about challenging the deterministic and positivist tendencies of science. The novel achieves this by combining the tools of western technology with the spirituality of the natives, a concept known as "counter-science," to create a new cyborg myth. The myth rejects the dominance of technology and strives to realise the posthumanist vision by incorporating various forms of knowledge. Mangala's counter-science group employs Western scientific methodologies while also incorporating elements of mysticism, presenting a synthesis of both approaches. This amalgamation does not adhere to the Orientalist notion of irrational superstition as the antithesis of Western science. Instead, it transcends the constraints of conventional Western science, thereby expanding its potential. There would be no posthuman utopia without this hybridisation of conventional science and "alternate" forms of knowledge.

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# Curiosity Without Curiosity: Challenging an Absurdity in the Structural Affect Theory

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LESLIE T. FRY

**Abstract:** Placing the outcome at the beginning of a story before the reasoning for that outcome does not necessarily make the reader curious, contrary to what some structural affect theorists posit. Using reader-response theory, this article explores six instances drawn from *Thousand and One Nights* and *The Odyssey* where the outcome appears at the beginning and the details leading up to that outcome are later explained. The main difference between these two in terms of generating curiosity in the reader through structural manipulation is that the author of *The Odyssey* waits an unreasonably long time before addressing the situation again, with the author distracting the reader with unnecessary side stories in the interim. The author of *Thousand and One Nights*, on the other hand, stays focused on the situation first raised when stating the outcome. While one might think that such a difference is only a matter of degree, the difference has a significant impact on the reader's experience inasmuch as the approach in *Thousand and One Nights* generates feelings of actual curiosity in the reader, while that of *The Odyssey* does not. This article represents a pilot study of how readers react to literature, based on the reader-response theory, with a focus on tension between the different notions of curiosity. In essence, the difference in these two types of curiosity resembles the difference between the efferent stance and the aesthetic stance of reader-response theory, with the first focusing on the personal experience of the reader, while the second focuses on pure analysis of the text's structure.

**Keywords:** Structural affect theory, curiosity, world literature, reader-response theory

## 1. Introduction

Structural affect theory defines curiosity as an author presenting an outcome of an event before the event occurs (Brewer and Lichtenstein). While it is possible that this literary device evokes curiosity in a reader, it is not necessary or sufficient to ensure actual curiosity. This article contrasts curiosity as a term of art and curiosity using its common definition when analyzing *Thousand and One Nights* and *The Odyssey* in order to challenge the implication of theorists that the first necessarily leads to the second. This article advocates a more common-sense approach to literary theory that adopts common definitions that make sense to lay readers, which can help avoid the paradoxes that modern theorists often trap themselves in (Compagnon) – here, curiosity without curiosity. The byproduct of such analysis should be to convince future authors to do more than rely on this literary device of structural manipulation of the narrative if they hope to actually evoke curiosity in the reader.

This article's thesis is supported by three substantive sections, in addition to this introduction and a conclusion. The next part provides key definitions and delimitations needed to understand this article's thesis and analysis, all of which relate to the definition of curiosity. The majority of the analysis appears in the next two parts, which focus on two masterpieces of world literature that use the literature device of starting with an explanation of the ending. *The Odyssey* squanders any curi-

osity the author hoped to generate from employing this device by immediately launching into background information or side stories that does not obviously relate to the ending, thereby losing the interest – let alone curiosity – of the reader. By the time the author returns to topics relating to the ending, the reader has long forgotten the presented outcome. *Thousand and One Nights*, on the other hand, captures and maintains the reader's curiosity by keeping the writing much tighter and focused on the presented outcome. This article's comparison raises serious questions about the validity of the structural affect theory in relation to curiosity.

Critics will point to this article's confirmation bias in the selection of its examples, as well as the subjective reactions to these pieces, and they will have a point. Nevertheless, as the conclusion explains, eventually interviewing others who have read these works can test these observations and increase their objectivity, all based on notions from reader-response theory that the audience generates meaning (Spiegel). According to reader-response theory, readers generate such meaning by situating themselves in various ways in relation to the text. Some focus on the efferent stance, where the reader tries to extract information from the text that can be "learned and retained after the reading event" (Cox and Many 29; Rosenblatt; Sipe). Others focus on the aesthetic stance, where the reader reads in order to have the personal, lived-through experience from the text (Smith; Sipe; Rosenblatt). A combination of these two stances can lead to the "richest literary understanding" (Sipe 258). This article advocates this sophisticated approach to reader-response theory, even though the analysis is somewhat skewed in favor of the aesthetic stance in order to bring greater balance to the discussion within the structural-affect-theory paradigm.

As highlighted in the conclusion, future researchers will be left to test the veracity of this article's observations with other parts of these books and in other books. This article is limited to merely suggesting the existence of a paradox and the need for a more common-sense definition of curiosity that focuses on one's personal experience with a text.

## 2. Definitions and Delimitations

Certain definitions and delimitations are needed in order to make sense of this article's thesis and its application to the works analyzed after this part. This part starts with the definition of curiosity as a term of art within the context of the structural affect theory, and then it develops the common definition of curiosity. The purpose is to highlight the differences between the two and the inherent paradox in the term-of-art version that arises from assuming that this literary device necessarily creates curiosity in the reader.

According to the structural affect theory, the narrative order that an author uses when writing a story can evoke curiosity, suspense, or surprise in the reader. In 1982, Brewer and Lichtenstein were the first to present this idea and to explain how the absence of information for fully understanding a story evokes these different emotions (Brewer and Lichtenstein). However, other scholars needed to condense and clarify those ideas before they could have their intended impact on literary theory. In particular, Hoeken and van Vliet winnowed down Brewer and Lichtenstein's theory to the following: "Suspense is evoked by postponing the story's outcome, curiosity is evoked by presenting the outcome before the preceding events, and surprise is evoked by an unexpected event" (Hoeken and van Vliet 277). This article is delimited by only looking at the component of structural affect theory that involves curiosity in order to simplify the analysis and to highlight the central paradox. Later structural affect theorists all have explicitly or implicitly adopted Hoeken's approach to understanding the theory in relation to curiosity, all assuming that this device is sufficient to "make[ ] the reader curious" (Albuquerque et al. 2). No exceptions have been found in the literature on structural affect theory that suggest that more than structural manipulation might be needed in order to generate actual curiosity in the reader. The logical flaw in this argument is that simply putting the outcome at the beginning does not necessarily make the reader curious, in particular if the missing information is obviously banal or if the explanation for the outcome is not provided within a reasonable period of time.



Applying this argument in an extreme situation to show its logical absurdity, suppose the first sentence of a 12-page story is as follows: “The typewriter’s ribbon eventually ran out of ink from Gilbert the Monkey’s banging: poiqrwr;;lnsdfn;aluqpr ehloiyoyp . . .” This story dutifully provides the outcome at the start – namely, running out of ink. However, any whiff of curiosity quickly dissipates in the split second it takes to grasp the punchline – namely, 12 pages of random banging on a keyboard by a monkey. Try as one might, there is no way for the reader to experience curiosity after that point of realization. Likewise with literature, putting the ending at the beginning does not necessarily make the reader curious, contrary to what structural affect theory asserts.

Instead, one must keep in mind the common definition of curiosity, which varies from the way that structural affect theory uses the term. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “a strong desire to know about something.” The Cambridge Dictionary agrees, providing a slightly different definition of “an eager wish to know or learn about something.” Loewenstein discusses the common definitions of curiosity over time, as used by various authors, all of which involve profound emotions, such as “passion for learning” by Cicero, “ocular lust” by St. Augustine, “an appetite for knowledge” by Kant, and “thirst for knowledge” by Freud (Loewenstein 76–77). Structural affect theory improperly focuses exclusively on the author’s mechanical ordering of the story, not on the actual awakening of passion in the reader.

With these definitions established, the next part proceeds to show that putting the end at the beginning in *The Odyssey* is not enough to ensure that the reader feels curious, as structural affect theory posits. At a minimum, structural affect theorists need to acknowledge this limitation.

### 3. Lack of Curiosity in *The Odyssey*

*The Odyssey* is replete with examples of how use of the literary device of putting the outcome at the beginning is insufficient to evoke actual curiosity in the reader. This part explores three examples. Before delving into those examples, however, it feels apropos to note how Voltaire expressed his frustrations with Homer’s inability to evoke actual curiosity in the reader when writing about Candide’s observations. In *Candide*, Voltaire addresses the need for a story to be interesting when Candide speaks with Lord Pococurante. When Candide admires Lord Pococurante’s Homer collection, the senator coldly replies that Homer bores him, and he only has the collection because it is required in order to be called an intellectual:

Once upon a time, I was forced to delude myself, believing I delighted in reading Homer. But the constant repetition of battles, every one just like the other; . . . all this produced in me deadly, deadly boredom. I’d occasionally inquire of scholars whether Homer’s poems bored them as much as they bored me. The honest men among them admitted it: the book kept falling out of their hands. But they always had to have it in their libraries, like a monument of antiquity . . .

Voltaire invites the reader to ask deep questions such as “Does God care about me?” and “Why do bad things happen to good people?” It would go beyond the narrow scope of this article to elaborate on how Voltaire’s own writings evoked genuine curiosity, besides these obvious examples. Suffice it to say here that, unlike Homer’s writings, Voltaire’s writings generally invoke genuine curiosity, and his apparent disdain for Homer should not be surprising.

Turning to *The Odyssey* itself, it is useful to highlight here how it is entirely framed in terms of the structural manipulation emphasized in this article. Book I famously starts with a summary of Odysseus’ entire adventure:

Tell me, O Muse, of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide after he had sacked the famous town of Troy. Many cities did he visit, and many were the nations with whose manners and customs he was acquainted; moreover he suffered much by sea while trying to save his own life and bring his men safely home; but do what he might he could not save his men, for they perished through their own sheer folly in eating the cattle of the Sun-god Hyperion; so the god prevented them from ever

reaching home. Tell me, too, about all these things, oh daughter of Jove, from whatsoever source you may know them.

This relatively concise summary sets out the outcome from the beginning – namely, that Odysseus eventually returns home safely. It also hints at the prophecy about the cattle, which is discussed below, as well as the swings between the positive and negative experiences that Odysseus endured during his adventures. Most important for this article's purposes, the text immediately after the summary goes to the middle of Odysseus' journey home, with the minutia of his wrangling with the gods. In short, the reader feels no closer to understanding Odysseus' safe return home by the end of Book I than they felt after the first paragraph, and that does not improve for many books. It is this kind of extreme delay in getting to the point that frustrates the realization of actual curiosity on the part of the reader.

With the specific examples, the most obvious example in *The Odyssey* of putting the outcome at the beginning not being sufficient to evoke actual curiosity appears in Book VIII, where King Alcinous, ruler of the Phaeacians, invites Odysseus to dine with him. At this feast, a bard's song about the Trojan War brings Odysseus to tears. Following the structural affect theory, the author presents the outcome first – namely, the sad outcome of the Trojan War – before providing the reasons behind Odysseus' tears. In the next paragraph, still on the first page of the story, all traces of curiosity are lost when Odysseus starts the "story of [his] sorrows" with his name, which turns out to be one long side story that lacks any obvious relevance to the main plot. The story continues along this detour for four painful chapters. With every word, the wish grows within the reader that the author would streamline the narrative.

Critics might claim that these growing desires on the part of the reader resemble the passions referred to in the common definition of curiosity. However, this is different because the passion does not relate to Odysseus himself but to a desire for the author to write in a more efficient manner and return to the main story. As quickly as the detour starts, the author swerves back into the present time with Odysseus in King Alcinous' company, leaving the reader wondering about the purpose of that significant deviation.

Similarly obvious is the prophecy scene inside of the flashback, where Odysseus goes to see the ghost Teresias. The nature of prophecy is to know the outcome before events transpire, which fits with the literary device being studied in this article. Two aspects of the prophecy are worth noting here. First, the prophecy notes the killing of the cattle of the Sun-god:

If you leave these flocks unharmed and think of nothing but of getting home, you may yet after much hardship reach Ithaca; but if you harm them, then I forewarn you of the destruction both of your ship and of your men. Even though you may yourself escape, you will return in bad plight after losing all of your men . . . , and you will find trouble in your house, which will be overrun by high-land people, who are devouring your substance under the pretext of paying court and making presents with your wife.

Admittedly, one somewhat needs to read between the lines to understand that the prophecy is saying that the cattle will be eaten. However, this is not difficult for the reader to understand because the reader already knows that there is trouble in Odysseus' house and that he lacks a crew. Interestingly, the content of this prophecy starts off *The Odyssey*, as quoted at the beginning of this section. Such repetitive use of this literary device shows how much faith the author has in its ability to build curiosity in the reader. However, this literary device alone is not enough to make the reader actually curious. After all, Odysseus does not ask any follow-up questions about why his crew will die or otherwise do anything with this prophecy once it is given that would pique the reader's curiosity. Instead, he immediately asks about his mother's ghost, he interacts with other ghosts, and he goes back to Circe's house to bury his friend Elpenor. None of this relates to the prophecy, leaving the prophecy with minimal impact on the reader's curiosity. As with this prophecy concerning the cattle, the prophecy's reference to the death of the suitors does little to build the reader's curiosity because the author does nothing with this information until much later in the story.

In sum, merely using the literary device of giving the outcome first does little to build the curiosity of the reader if the author does nothing significant with this information within a reasonable period of time. As the following part shows, the literary device builds curiosity only if the author does something further with this information.

#### 4. Curiosity in *Thousand and One Nights*

Unlike *The Odyssey*, *Thousand and One Nights* evokes actual curiosity by providing the details leading up to the outcome shortly after providing the outcome at the beginning. It is this shorter period of time that distinguishes these two masterpieces of world literature from the perspective of curiosity. This part explores three noteworthy examples in *Thousand and One Nights*.

Before exploring the specific examples, it is important to note how the entire framework of *Thousand and One Nights* employs the structural manipulation of putting the outcome at the beginning, similar to *The Odyssey*, as explained above. In the introductory chapter, the reader is introduced to the cruelty and hypocrisy of King Shahrayar, who beheads his adulterous wife and her co-conspirators and who then sleeps with and summarily kills a new virgin each night. With all but two virgins of marriageable age having fled the city, the king's trusted vizier has no choice but to bring his own daughters to the king. Before doing so and sealing their fate, the vizier gives Shahrazad (or Shahrazad herself provides, depending on which version you read) a sliver of hope by indicating that she should tell the king strange stories in an effort to pique the king's curiosity and delay her execution. From this introduction, the reader feels an overwhelming sense of doom for Shahrazad and her sister Dinarzad, given the king's past cruelties, while at the same time feeling hopeful that she successful will delay the inevitable.

Immediately in the first chapter, Shahrazad launches into her first tale of the merchant and the Jinnee (or demon). Shahrazad's story is intentionally unfinished at the break of dawn, when the king usually would have murdered his victim: "But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence, leaving King Shahrayar burning with curiosity to hear the rest of the story." The king is convinced to spare her life one more night in order to hear the conclusion of the tale. This continues on each night, all the while allowing the narrative to maintain the feeling of impending doom for the vizier's daughters, especially with the occasional appearance of threatening tones through references to betrayal and the like. It is difficult to find or even imagine a better example of literature employing structural manipulation to generate curiosity in the reader, with the lack of delay in explaining the revealed outcome intensifying that curiosity.

Proceeding with the specific examples of structural manipulation in *Thousand and One Nights*, the most obvious example appears on the thirty-second night, when the three women open their door to the three dervishes. All three dervishes lack an eye and hair on their heads, which makes their appearance shocking. They then declare that they will explain how they came to look this way. They each tell their own account of what happened, in an incremental but deliberate manner. Curiosity grows in the reader with each dervish's story.

The third dervish's story is a particularly compelling example, who stumbles upon ten one-eyed men entering a palace, along with an old man. The third dervish is "astonished to see that each young man was blind in the right eye, and marvel[s] at this coincidence." They welcome him in, and he observes how they arrange themselves on the couches of the palace. The old man warns the third dervish, "Young man, sit down on the floor and do not inquire about our situation or the loss of our eyes." With this warning, the old man serves them dinner and they listen to the third dervish's tale. The one-eyed men then asked the old man, "Old man, will you give us our due, for it is time to go to bed?" The following is a description of their nightly ritual:

The old man rose, entered a chamber, and came back, carrying on his head ten trays, each covered with a blue cover. He set a tray before each young man and, lighting ten candles, stuck one on each tray. Then he drew off the covers, and there appeared on each tray nothing but ashes, powdered charcoal,

and kettle soot. Then, rolling up their sleeves, every young man blackened his face and smeared his clothes with soot and ashes, beat his breast and face, and wept and wailed, crying out again and again, "We would be sitting pretty but for our curiosity." They carried on like this until it was close to sunrise. Then the old man rose and heated some water for them, and the young men ran, washed themselves, and put on clean clothes.

Again, the reader is presented with an outcome that has the potential to evoke curiosity – ten one-eyed men in a palace covered in soot.

The third dervish expresses the natural reaction that anyone would have after seeing such a scene: "My lady, when I saw what the young men had done and how they had blackened their faces, I was filled with bewilderment and curiosity and forgot my own misfortunes." The mystery of how this situation came about deepens when the third dervish keeps asking how this happened, but they refuse to tell:

"Young man, we have kept our secret from you only out of pity for you, so that you would not suffer what we have suffered." I replied, "You must tell me." They said, "Young man, listen to our advice and don't ask, lest you become one-eyed like us." I repeated, "I must know the secret." They replied, "Young man, when you find out the secret, remember that we will no longer harbor you nor let you stay with us again."

They eventually capitulate and tell him that he can go through the ordeal himself, if he actually wants to know. During this ordeal, he loses his own eye due to a demon, and the mystery is resolved, even though it is not clear why this ordeal – involving the losing of an eye and the blackening of the face – was necessary. Regardless, the telling of the outcome at the beginning combined with an explanation of how that outcome came about shortly thereafter leads to genuine curiosity both on the part of the reader and the king, who continues to spare Shahrazad each night.

A final example involves the three women, especially the first woman. Upon inviting the three dervishes to sit down, the first woman retrieves two black female hounds from a cupboard and begins to whip them:

He took them and led them to the middle of the hall. Saying, "It is time to perform our duty," the mistress of the house came forward, rolled up her sleeves, took a braided whip, and called to the porter, "Bring me one of the bitches." The porter dragged one of the bitches by the chain and brought her forward, while she wept and shook her head at the girl. As the porter stood holding the chain, the girl came down on the bitch with hard blows on the sides, while the bitch howled and wept. The girl kept beating the bitch until her arm got weary.

After this harsh whipping, she cries with the hounds and kisses them:

Then she stopped, threw the whip away, and, taking the chain from the porter, embraced the bitch and began to cry. The bitch too began to cry, and the two cried together for a long time. Then the girl wiped the bitch's tears with her handkerchief, kissed her on the head, . . .

The reader does not know why she is whipping or kissing the hounds. At first, the first woman repeatedly refuses to explain what happened, although she eventually gives in after the dervishes tell their own stories in great detail. The woman recounts how her two older sisters killed the man who she loved. A serpent who she saved magically turned the sisters into hounds. The serpent told her that she needed to beat the hounds nightly or else she herself would be turned into a hound. In all of these intriguing excerpts, the outcome is stated upfront, with the explanation of how that outcome happened being provided within a reasonable period of time.

Critics might argue that this gap between the outcome and the explanation for the outcome with the beating of the hounds is similar to *The Odyssey's* structure, which might diminish the curiosity of the reader. However, this is not the case. In *The Odyssey*, all of the accounts feel like a complete detour, whereas in *Thousand and One Nights*, they are all equally important and interconnected. In other words, the author of *Thousand and One Nights* does a better job of staying on topic, which tremendously helps build actual curiosity on the part of the reader.

## 5. Conclusion

As this article has suggested, placing the outcome at the beginning of a story before the reasoning for that outcome does not necessarily make the reader curious, contrary to what structural affect theory posits. Using reader-response theory, this article explored six instances drawn from *Thousand and One Nights* and *The Odyssey* where the outcome appears at the beginning and the details are later explained. These two works are similar not only in their unequivocal status as classics in world literature, but they also represent examples of how the author uses tension over the protagonist's fate to keep the reader engaged. The main difference between these two in terms of generating curiosity in the reader is that the author of *The Odyssey* waits an unreasonably long time before addressing the situation again, with the author distracting the reader with unnecessary side stories before returning to the main plot. The author of *Thousand and One Nights*, on the other hand, stays focused on the situation first raised when stating the outcome at the beginning. While one might think that such a difference is only a matter of degree, the difference has a significant impact on the reader's personal experience inasmuch as the approach in *Thousand and One Nights* actually generates feelings of curiosity in the reader, while that of *The Odyssey* does not.

This article represents a pilot study of how readers react to literature, based on the reader-response theory. With more time and resources, future research on this topic should adopt more rigorous qualitative methods in surveying others who have read these books in order to test the validity of the personal reactions to these books' passages contained in this article and to come closer to an objective perspective of the meaning and role of these passages.

Future research also will want to include other masterpieces of world literature concerning curiosity. This article has focused on the more extreme examples of curiosity in order to make this article's point more obvious. Other examples presumably will fall somewhere along a spectrum. Closer to the side of *Thousand and One Nights*, one might consider including Bourges' *Ficciones*, in which he depicts in this short story collection metaphysical concepts in an abstract way to invoke curiosity in the reader. For example, in "The Library of Babel," an infinite library is described as storing books with the same number of pages, lines per page, and letters per page. This library contains all books that ever existed as well as books that make no sense. When first reading this, one might feel that there is an explanation to what Bourges means in his writing but it is hard to wrap one's head around it. Additionally, Bourges discusses the need for a story to be interesting. In his short story "Death and the Compass," the main character Lonnrot rejects Treviranus' conclusion that the murder of the rabbi was the robber's mistake. Lonnrot stated: "It's possible, but not interesting." He rejects the concept only because he finds it too bland. In the end, Treviranus' hypothesis was indeed correct and Lonnrot was incorrect. Critics may say that a piece that is interesting through curiosity may be inauthentic because it does not match reality. Bourges discusses how one may have to give up authenticity in exchange for interest. They both seem inversely proportionate, but Bourges tries to strike a balance between the two, which might be worth exploring in a future publication. On the other side of the spectrum, closer to *The Odyssey*, it might be tempting to include analysis of *Lusiads*, which follows a plot line that is similar to *The Odyssey*. Both *The Odyssey* and *Lusiads* evoke more suspense and surprise than actual curiosity. Neither is especially memorable inasmuch as the reader hardly ever is led to ask why something might have happened because the reason already has been shared. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* would appear somewhere in the middle of these two poles, mainly because it piques the reader's curiosity by occasionally referencing genuinely curious topics like immortality, with the reader being led to ask such questions as "Why does Gilgamesh want to receive immortality?" and "Why did the gods choose to grant Utnapishtim immortality?" This genuine curiosity is in addition to the structural-affect-theory type of curiosity that involves the presentation of an outcome of an event before the event occurs. It is this latter type of curiosity that actually dampens the impact of the more profound type of curiosity in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. More



systematic and rigorous analysis of these other pieces of world literature is needed in order to better understand the impact of these types of curiosity in these other works.

Even though this article looks at only two pieces of world literature, this article constitutes a strong first step in eventually bringing greater understanding to the topic of how to create curiosity in readers through the careful ordering of a story and the controlled release of information over time, not just through presenting an outcome of an event before the event occurs, as structural affect theory would posit. Indeed, structural affect theorists must not overlook the importance of the personal response of a reader to a story, at least when it comes to curiosity.

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### Acknowledgements

The author thanks David Damrosch, Alexander Hartley, Elisabeth McKetta, and Martin Puchner for their encouragement and feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

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# National Imagination and Postnational Condition: Autobiography and the Shaping and Reshaping of Indian Political Discourse

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MD ASIF UZZAMAN

**Abstract:** This paper looks at the genre of autobiography and its usage and evolution in the hands of political leaders in India. Comparing two autobiographies, namely, Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* and Lalu Prasad Yadav's *Gopalganj to Raisina: My Political Journey* it explores the narrative of what Jaffrelot has classified as two major moments in Indian political history. Carrying forward Elleke Boehmer's discussion on political autobiographies in postcolonial world, who explores the allegory of leaders' journey as nation's emergence, this paper reads the two leaders' autobiographies to compare and contrast their lives, political thought and the nature of allegory with the nation.

**Keywords:** autobiography, allegory, nationalism, caste, postnation

## Introduction

In the arena of political discourse in India, there have been two major waves dedicated to self-defining of the political subjectivity by the people. These movements not only succeeded in forging newer essentialist identities but also sought democratisation on the basis of these identities—with considerable success. The nationalist movement against the British rule in India defined the Indian-ness of the people against the British, and declared the illegitimacy of British rule on the basis of their foreign origin and commitment. This awakening of an 'Indian' selfhood among the people ultimately led to the institutionalisation of Universal Adult Franchise in India or, in other words, institutionalisation of political democracy in India. However, political democracy remained largely reflective of the unequal societal order for a long time. The political discourse, at the national level, remained largely centred on the considerations established by the Indian National Congress – since the inception of the modern Republic – till its fault lines began to show in the 1960s. The nationalist manoeuvre of the Independence movement which, according to Partha Chatterjee, had made an “appropriation of peasant support for the historic cause of creating a nation state” began manifesting its shortcomings (Chatterjee 45). The decade saw the emergence of an alternative political discourse at the national level—one that was concerned with the historic oppression of the lower caste and peasant groups, especially that of North India. Christophe Jaffrelot expresses this development in the following words:

In the mid 1970s the Congress had reached a kind of stalemate since it was congenitally unable to reconcile political and social democracy in North India, the meta-region commanding the fate of the whole country (Jaffrelot 9).

Further, this rise of the lower caste groups from North India in the political discourse of the country has been described by Jaffrelot as “the second age of Indian democracy” (Jaffrelot 9). The nationalist movement of early twentieth century and then the rise of the lower caste anti-Congressism in the last

quarter of the same are two defining moments of not only the mobilisation of specific groups of people in active politics but also the larger political discourse concerning the self and the nation.

Despite considerable discursive changes in the two aforementioned moments of Indian political history, there is a trans-historical truth about the nature of relation between people and their leaders. Political movements, even while carrying egalitarian values, remain centered around personalities of its leaders—a trend especially notable in the third world. While exploring the reasons behind this trend is not a scope of this paper, it gives an important point to reflect upon the self-expression by the political leaders and their reception by the masses who follow their narrative. The narratives of emancipation require a human manifestation whose own improving condition could be seen as the success of the movement. Story of an individual's life becomes a significant point of contact between the leaders and the masses as it gives legitimacy to the movement by showing the sincerity of their leaders and a promise of success. In her work on postcolonial nationalism and male leaders' autobiographies, Elleke Boehmer observes a trend in Postcolonial autobiographies where "the leader's individual selfhood is equated with the nation's collective identity" (Boehmer 66). Benedict Anderson has pointed out the importance of production and distribution of nationalistic literature as an important factor in shaping the political imagination of the masses. Autobiography, though they are written not entirely for the purpose of ideological propaganda, play that role for its consuming public. The trend of ideology-critique in literary studies, emerging out of Marxist understanding of literature and culture, have long since established this idea. Moreover, the role of a leader-as-writer has its own consequence in the narrative, since the leader does not retire from his political role while donning the garb of a writer. The two roles feed into each other in the autobiography of a political leader. This usage of the genre serves not only a confessional purpose but also has a manifesto-like orientation. As much as it is a record of a political life, it is also meant to influence and reproduce such lives—especially when it is written during the leader's active years of his leadership. Not only are these texts products of the authors' political convictions but are also meant as tools for propagation of their political discourse. Writing about the shaping of a national imagination in its male leader's image, Elleke Boehmer mentions that the leader's autobiography "supplies defining images, drawn from the life, through which to understand the nation's emergence into subjecthood, and to justify its new arrangements of privilege and authority" (Boehmer 67). This is particularly true for a country like India where the authority to produce national imaginings remain in the hands of the same elite group which also has the privilege of consuming the written word—especially those written in the English language. This truth about concentration of literary and cultural production as well as the production of political discourse in the same class opens up the ethical task of making speculations beyond the nation-form along with a critique of elite cultural production. Explorations of post-national prospects, as opposed to nationalist imaginations, becomes not only a political task but an analytical force for understanding alternative narratives. If a certain type of political autobiography becomes a narrative of the nation, autobiographies of political leaders who rose in opposition to such politics would provide alternative meanings of community and political vision. Such alternative narratives, I argue, need to be analysed for their breaking away from what Etienne Balibar calls "fictive ethnicity" of the nation form (Balibar 359). It would be interesting to draw such a contrast between two autobiographies from the Indian context since the country's history, as proposed along the lines of Jaffrelot's argument above, has two defining moments of overall political discourse, both representing a democratic development—one political and another social. The following sections of this paper look at autobiographies of two leaders associated with the two waves of democracy – political and social – that India witnessed in the twentieth century. The paper shall look at Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, originally published in 1936, and Lalu Prasad Yadav's *Gopalganj to Raisina* (2019) whose account reflects on his early life of dispossession and a coming of age into the moment of alternative political assertion of the late twentieth century. The paper shall compare the politics expressed by the two texts as well as contrast them on the basis of their engagement with production and challenge to nationalist discourse and imagination.

### Jawaharlal Nehru and the Moment of Nationalist Manoeuvre: *An Autobiography*

In his essay “The Constitution of Indian Nationalist Discourse” Partha Chatterjee has described three stages in the formation and development of the discourse of Indian nationalism. The “moment of departure”, the “moment of manoeuvre”, and the “moment of arrival” mark the chronological discursive temperaments within the nationalist thought (Chatterjee 44). While the moment of departure marked an attempt at establishing a cultural superiority of the Indians over the British, developed in the hands of writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the two steps that followed it were subtler and worked rather inwardly and insidiously. The second, according to Partha Chatterjee, was the moment of manoeuvre, led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, which sought to “take nationalist politics to the peasantry” and in doing so it either “transformed” the peasant consciousness or “appropriated” it (48). This was also the time of introduction of utopian ideas like ‘Ramarajya’ into the peasant consciousness. The third and last step was that of departure, which came in the nationalist discourse under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. This was a time of a shift from the earlier ideological manoeuvres towards finding pragmatic solutions for the problems of an emergent nation-state. *An Autobiography*, if looked at in the light of Partha Chatterjee’s classification of nationalist thought, is a document concerning the last two phases in construction of nationalist discourse. On the one hand, it narrates a categorical departure from Gandhi’s idealism, and on the other hand – coming from a socially elite vantage point – presents a nationalist vision based on similar notions of subjecthood as Gandhi’s.

Nehru’s *An Autobiography* lays down its purpose of reproducing the proposed discourse in the opening few pages itself. The 1982 version of *An Autobiography* begins with a Foreword by Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi, who declares the book as a narration of “not merely the quest of one individual for freedom, but an insight into the making of the mind of new India” (xv). The claim of being the “mind of new India”, paired with the author’s own admission that “for foreign readers, I would have written differently, or with a different emphasis,” establishes the book’s purpose as not merely a personal recollection but also as a document laying down a proposition for a target audience i.e. the national subject (Nehru xv).

Much like a religious scripture beginning with a genealogy of its prime figure, *An Autobiography* begins with description of Nehru’s family from two generations before him—with specific dates where the narrative requires. In narrating the life journey of his grandfather, for example, the author mentions that “it was in Agra on the sixth of May 1861 that my father was born” (Nehru 2). It brings out his social status as that of the elite class which had access to documentation of births and deaths during the period of British rule. Close access to the institutions set up by colonial rule is a testament to the fact of ownership of resources which the larger colonised population was deprived of. The author, however, does not shy away from acknowledging his social privileges in the least. Far from it, he seems to be presenting his early life with a grandeur in its description, in order for laying a claim as a suitable leader and a provider of hope in the process. In defining his childhood as “sheltered and uneventful” and overt admission of having spent most of his time in close quarters with British machinery, with expressions like “In my heart I rather admired the English,” we find an emerging postcolonial leader expressing his awareness of both the concerned cultures and presenting himself as one who knows the best way to negotiate for a better future for the people of his country (Nehru 6). On a cultural level, Nehru’s autobiography presents an informed critique of superstitions around him, such as that of a ceremony of purification which a Brahmin had to go through upon his return from Europe, in the third chapter. However, the more important critique that is made in the book is not that of the social evils but that of the political practices in his own movement. Nehru writes:

My politics had been those of my class, the bourgeoisie. Indeed all vocal politics then, and to a great extent even now, were those of the middle classes, and Moderate and Extremist alike represented them and, in different keys, sought their betterment. (Nehru 48)

This awareness of the nationalist movement not being representative of the masses is further exemplified with the mentions of newspapers “owned and controlled chiefly by the landlords and the industrialists” which alone was called “nationalist” (Nehru 49). What seems to be happening here is a socialist analysis of the nationalist movement he had been associated with. However, this awareness of the nationalist movement being elite in nature is not to be taken as a complete disillusionment with it on the part of the author. The elitism of the movement could well be a positive aspect of it, when thought of in terms of the capacity needed for running the machinery of a novel nation-state. This needs to be seen as a point where Nehru differed and departed from Gandhi, but not quite. If Gandhi’s method of using religious symbolism in his speeches among the poor irked Nehru, the act of involving peasantry in the nationalist movement and affecting their consciousness itself drew no similar criticism from him. Writing about the fusion of religious elements in the movement, he states:

Even some of Gandhi’s phrases sometimes jarred upon me—thus his frequent reference to *Rama Raj* as a golden age which was to return. But I was powerless to intervene, and I consoled myself with the thought that Gandhiji used the words because they were well known and understood by the masses. He had an amazing knack of reaching the heart of the people. (Nehru 72)

With these words, Nehru expresses a disassociation from the economy of expression and reception which was peculiar to Gandhi’s interactions with the masses. However, this almost painful submission is followed by an admission, almost as a counter point to this expression. With the words that follow, one can read his engagement with Gandhi’s method as not being a criticism but a mere cultural difference which Nehru was too faraway to relate to. As he further writes:

But I did not worry myself much over these matters. I was too full of my work and the progress of our movement to care for such trifles, as I thought at the time they were...so long as our main direction was correct, a few eddies and backwaters did not matter. (Nehru 72)

Here, not only an informed position is being taken on the use of metaphysical elements in a popular movement, but the involvement of larger masses is being used for justifying these elements as well. Religious ideas, which supposedly troubled Nehru when proclaimed before the masses, is being hailed as something which connected people in a way that was incomparable to any other form of expression. Nehru’s nationalism can thus be deduced from his critique of the use of religious symbols in nationalism, and then finding its validity in the larger good of the movement. The means were not important as long as it served the purpose of manoeuvre well. This very idea of appropriating peasant consciousness is of prime importance for the success of the movement—this is not only the *story* of Nehru’s autobiography but is also its *proposition*. The nationalist imagination of India which *An Autobiography* presents is that of an informed social elite during colonial rule, for whom a transfer of power from the British hands to an Indian hand was the sole concern during the movement’s progression. The imagination of the nation, in this view, considers social change as a gradual process which political democracy would naturally usher. This idea guided the political imagination as well as social consciousness for decades. Despite its critique and discomforts – or more so, because of them – Nehru maintains a uniquely nationalistic standpoint, and *An Autobiography* presents a strong nationalist discourse. *An Autobiography* feeds into the nationalist politics of manoeuvre of the time and contributes to the promises of the emergent nation. The imaginations of Indian politics that the book presents remained unquestioned for a long time—till the political rise of the lower castes in North India in the later decades of the twentieth century.

### ***Gopalganj to Raisina: A Postnational Narrative?***

The idea of India constructed through the nationalist movement and inherited as a legacy of anti-colonial struggle proved detrimental to the cause of social justice in the long run. It was evident from the awareness of the same by the mainstream leaders like Nehru and their unwillingness to pursue an alternative path. Sumit Sarkar has drawn attention to the stark distinction between the nationalist



movement led by Middle-class leadership and the 'popular' struggles led by peasant and tribal leaders in late colonial India to point out their differing concerns, methods and goals of anti-colonial movement<sup>1</sup>. The conservative elements of nationalist thought, coupled with Nehruvian appropriation of it into state-ideology, not only ruled out possibilities for alternative politics but also ensured that any radical political thought deserved rightful suppression. Partha Chatterjee recounts the early years of the implementation of Nehruvian rationality of the nation-state in the following words: "The coercion of the state was itself a rational instrument for the achievement of progress by the nation. It was to be used by the state with surgical dispassion, and would be justified by the rationality of its own ends" (Chatterjee 58). Such coercion was necessitated by the project of keeping up the integrity of the newly formed nation-state which in turn necessitated the suppression of voices which sought to break the political and cultural hegemony of the existing nationalist imagination. Apart from the state coercion, nationalism served as an ideology that shaped popular consciousness—especially in the North. According to Christophe Jaffrelot, "in northern India more than anywhere else" Gandhi's doctrines and ideas had "strengthened the conservatives within Congress" since the time of the anti-colonial struggle (8). This accumulation of conservatism over time necessitated a break away, which came in the form of the emergence of lower caste politics in the later decades.

Today, liberalisation of Economies has given rise to debates around questions of newer subjecthood, in the wake of cross-cultural exchanges. Theoretical formulations around moving beyond the national boundaries and imaginations are being made. These discussions, such as that in Jurgen Habermas' *The Postnational Constellation* (1998) or Arjun Appadurai's "Patriotism and Its Futures", began with the idea of the "post-national" condition as a mingling of people from different nationalities. A major intervention in conceptualising the postnation, however, has been made by Nivedita Menon, in her essay "Thinking through the Postnation" published in 2009, which suggests looking within the national boundary in order to move beyond the nationalist imagination. She writes,

The sense in which I will use the term 'postnational' ... is very different from this sense in which corporations and the self-defined 'global civil society' conceive of spaces above and beyond the nation-state. (Menon 317)

Menon conceptualises the postnational as "a vantage point that insists on location in the face of translatability" (317). Possibilities of moving beyond the nation can emerge and remain located within the spatial boundary of a nation. The awareness of an absence of universality in the nationalist thought provides a valid ground for alternative prospects. Jaffrelot's "second age of democracy in India" which came into being as a result of the rise of the lower castes in North India, can be seen as a departure from the national imagination of the past and towards an alternative politics which I shall be calling "postnational", following Menon's formulation. The many developments associated with it were within the spatial boundary of the nation, and beyond the elite nationalist imagination formulated by the Indian National Congress since the anti-colonial movement. This alternative politics, which focused on democratisation on the social level, through political power, introduced reservations for the "Other Backward Classes" in government institutions through the implementation of Mandal Commission Report in 1990. This was in direct contrast with the monolithic imagination of Indian society fostered by nationalist manoeuvres where the elite section virtually spoke for all. Interestingly, this was also the time of the rise of the regional political parties in north India. Socio-political democracy and an alternative to monolithic political power in the hands of a single national party went hand in hand. Since our concern is life narratives of political leaders (and our assumption is that they are meant to reflect the authors' politics as well as serve as allegorical representation of the political discourse effected by their movement), we would look at an autobiography by one of the major leaders of this second phase of democracy in India.

One of the tallest leaders to come out of the late twentieth century politics of anti-Congressism was Lalu Prasad Yadav. Recounting the moment of agitation for Mandal Commission implementation – a milestone for the alternative political assertion – Yadav writes in his autobiography, *Gopalganj to*

*Raisina*, “I was determined to execute the Mandal recommendation in both letter and spirit” at the cost of being called a “symbol of anarchy” (Yadav 88). This political assertion at the national level spearheaded by the lower caste groups from north India indeed came to be seen as a moment of anarchy for the nationalist politics and imagination.

Lalu Prasad Yadav’s autobiography, *Gopalganj to Raisina*, came out in the year 2019—the year for country’s five year termed general elections. In the book, Yadav critiques the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party representing his archrival ideological position in contemporary political scenario, much more harshly throughout the text than the Indian National Congress against which his early politics and political career had taken shape. This can be seen as a critique of the ideas that inform the two parties in their practical purposes—the former’s more so now than the latter’s. In other words, Yadav recognises the dynamism of the relationship between proclaimed political ideology and the real-life practices which the political parties as their *modus operandi*. The political inheritance of the social evils of caste and class in the Indian National Congress against which he had built his politics was now inherited by the BJP—hence a complete shift of bullseye. He ensures that an understanding of such dynamism comes out as part of the message of his narrative. Narrating an incident where Yadav had saved a woman from a group of preying men who had surrounded her, he makes sure to make a point of the social vision of his politics. He writes:

As I reached near the brick kiln, I found six men catching hold of a woman... The offenders were shocked and surprised to see me in the dead of night... I then escorted the terrified woman, who belonged to an ST, to my vehicle... Then I got cases lodged against the six offenders; they were all BJP men from the Brahmarshi Samaj—an upper caste group—and hailed from proper Bihta suburb. (Yadav 62)

The narrative is overtly expressive of the power-relation between different caste and tribe groups as they manifest in the instances of atrocities. What it also does is presenting a discursive significance of the incident and conveying the political commitment behind his own action. In narrating a tale of his dynamism in saving a Scheduled Tribe woman from members of Brahmarshi Samaj associated with the BJP, the narrator is exposing before the audience several social realities and even hinting at social responsibilities. *Gopalganj to Raisina*, much like Nehru’s *An Autobiography*, is thus meant not only as a confessional or retrospective text but as a manifesto for reproduction of the author’s own politics. A critique of the exploitative neo-nationalism is made evident in the story, even when the context is deeply personal. What is also evident throughout the text is an attempt at changing the essentially exploitative “system” which had been constituted with the birth of the Indian nation-state. Under the subheading “Betrayed by the Bureaucracy”, he explains the failure of his plan for establishing *Charwaha Vidyalyas* (Cowherd Schools) for children who could not go to traditional schools because of their working hours in the fields. A failure of the plan after its initial success is attributed to the fact that he “did not have an adequate number of IAS officers who were committed to the cause of the oppressed and the economically and socially backward classes” (Yadav 93). Tussle with the bureaucracy has been a recurrent theme of the post-Congress era politics in India, and can be seen as a part of the politics against the grain. Yadav’s constant dispute with administrative officers is not only a conflict between two individuals, or even two institutional positions of power, but between a leader who has emerged with the politics of social justice and the dominance of the social elite in the institutions set up by the nationalist politics of half a century before.

In posing a counter-position, *Gopalganj to Raisina* touches upon several different themes. Compared to Jawaharlal Nehru’s *An Autobiography*, Yadav’s autobiography presents a distinctly alternative viewpoint on meta-narratives like religion. If Nehru expresses occasional discomforts with overtly irrational practices, Yadav begins his text with an attack on the scriptural base of the social disparity which he witnessed around him. In the Introduction, he writes:

Even the Manuvadi forces, who subscribe to the caste hierarchy, today claim to be the champions of Babasaheb’s legacy. It would not be out of place to mention here a passage in one of the sacred texts that reflects the caste conundrum:

*Dhol, ganwar, shudra, pashu, nari,  
Sakal tadna ke adhikari.*

(The illiterate, the low-caste, the animal and the woman,  
They deserve to be beaten up to drive sense into them.) (Yadav 11)

Moreover, the contrast in description of birth and early childhood is even more telling of the social conditions and the consequent possibilities available in life. Nehru's autobiography begins by narrating his grandfather's descent from Kashmir, his father's birth on a certain date, and facets of his protected childhood. In contrast, Lalu Yadav's begins with a sense of humility in its content and expression. In his opening words, "I began my innings in this world in a very ordinary environment. It was as ordinary as ordinary can get. In fact, so ordinary that none in my family seemed to know my exact date of birth" we see a laying out of destitution upon which the narrative further builds its politics (Yadav 1). In the formation of the narrative, Yadav remains keen on presenting his voice not only as belonging to a 'backward' caste, but also as an assertive leader of the same. If on one level, it is a story of a person of socially marginalised section rising to a position of power, it is also about hardships faced and assertions made in its course. The strategic political statements, made between narrating tales of personal and political adventures, can be seen as an attempt in making a place for oneself in the tradition of autobiographies, and also creating and sustaining a political discourse which remains at the risk of being engulfed by nationalistic metanarratives. When looked in comparison with Nehru's autobiography, and Elleke Boehmer's articulation about anti-colonial leaders' autobiographies serving an allegorical function, Yadav's narration can be seen as a post-national political practice, which indulges in breaking glass ceilings on multiple fronts of the setup established by the nation-state – social, political and discursive – while insisting on no real affiliation whatsoever with globalization debates which the speculations of 'post-nation' has usually taken in the final decades of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup>.

In the concluding chapters of *An Autobiography*, Jawaharlal Nehru lists out visions for – and hurdles in – the establishment of a Socialist economy in India. In flirting with the idea of Socialism, he mentions an interesting opinion of Sir Malcolm Hailey who had "prophesied that India will take to National Socialism" as a possibility (Nehru 590). The many considerations around Socialist and Marxist theory, its manipulated application in various countries, and the theory's defense against practical manifestations constitute an entire long chapter in Nehru's text. It can be considered as a vision of the narrator and a logical conclusion to his lifelong efforts. Formation of what has come to be known as 'Welfare state' where the benefits are diffused to the dispossessed from the centralized nation-state's apparatus comes out as the defining proposition of Nehru's writings and political practice. In contrast, the major considerations for Yadav in *Gopalganj to Raisina* is the democratisation of society vis a vis the elitism of bureaucratic and political structures, which cause disservice to the marginalised population. Yadav, in contrast with Nehru whose concern was strengthening of political institution for progress and development, represents a politics which seeks to make changes in the social and political structure itself. He dedicates the Epilogue of his autobiography for comparing the 1975 Emergency with the present i.e. the time of BJP government in power, and declares the latter as more challenging and dangerous. If Nehru's primary concern is economy, Yadav's is democracy.

This divide between the focus on economic welfare by one and societal democracy by the other can be understood through Partha Chatterjee's explanation of two types of "societies" that came into form in the post-colonial era—civil and political. "Civil Society", constituted by the elite section of the country, dedicated itself to the work of welfare for the people, whereas the "political society" became a source of mobilisation – often against the former section – for bringing about "democracy" in social and political quarters (Chatterjee 169). In the light of this formulation, and the narrations of the two autobiographies that we have discussed above, it would not be wrong to postulate that *An Autobiography* is a document of a unique nationalist vision, narrated through an individual leader's life story, representing and addressing the civil society of the modern nation-

state. In contrast, *Gopalganj to Raisina* introduces a postnational prospect, representing and seeking reproduction of a “political society”, from within the spatial boundary of the Indian nation, for fostering newer social, political and narrative frameworks.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Sarkar, Sumit. *‘Popular’ Movements And ‘Middle Class’ Leadership In Late Colonial India*. K P Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 1983. <http://archive.org/details/dli.bengal.10689.12708>.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on globalization and postnation, refer to Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996).

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# Foregrounding the Servant: Interrogating the Representation of Domestic Servitude in Select Works of Pakistani Anglophone Fiction

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SAPTAPARNI CHOWDHURY

**Abstract:** Domestic servitude as an institution has been a salient, indispensable and ubiquitous, yet largely undiscerned and underrepresented part of South Asian lived experiences and has been integral to the formation and consolidation of class identities on either side of employer-servant dynamic. Much akin to their widespread prevalence in South Asia, servants have been a consistent presence in South Asian postcolonial literary oeuvres. A study of the depiction of literary servants alerts readers to the significance of these characters not just in terms of their diegetic functions- it provides crucial insights into the representational politics underlying any particular text. South Asian literary scholar Ambreen Hai has proposed a new generic category by the name “postcolonial servitude fiction” to refer to a budding corpus of Anglophone South Asian fiction which foregrounds servants as central protagonists, probe into the interiorities and subjectivities of these lower-class figures, illuminating various facets of domestic servitude hitherto unaddressed. By bringing the three texts namely *Salt and Saffron* (2000), “Surface of Glass” and “Scar” into conversation with each other, this paper seeks to challenge and the rethink the established discourse surrounding domestic servants, and proposes revised and egalitarian modes of perceiving and understanding them.

**Keywords:** Domestic servitude, servitude fiction, Pakistani Anglophone literature, Kamila Shamsie

Domestic servitude as an institution has been a salient, indispensable and ubiquitous, yet largely undiscerned and underrepresented part of South Asian lived experiences. Literature produced within and about various parts of the Indian subcontinent are replete with references to servants, tracing their presence at least as far back as the Vedic period. The preponderance of a plethora of terms in subcontinental writings such as the “... Vedic *dasis* and the *bhritya* of the *Dharmashastras*...the *ghulam* of the Sultanate period, the *kaneez* and the *launda* of the mughal times... *naukars* and *chakars* of the colonial era to the all-inclusive category of the contemporary ‘servant’...” (Sinha et al. 4) testifies to the uninterrupted and enduring history of domestic servitude in this region. Domestic servants have been known to perform a broad array of roles in varying capacities, that have included domestic, emotional, care-giving and at times sexual services. Domestic servitude still continues unabated within the subcontinent, having undergone great transformation in accordance with mutating socio-economic and politico-cultural contexts, right from the feudal times through to the modern capitalist and postcolonial era. As a “historically constructed labour relation”, domestic servitude, besides being an absolutely essential component of the domestic existence of the middle and upper classes in the subcontinent, is also integral to the formation and consolidation of class identities on either side of employer-servant dynamic, with servants constituting a “distinct class” of “premodern” Others, in relation to whom, middle- and upper-class selfhood is defined and consti-



tuted (Ray and Qayum 2). It is through a careful and fraught negotiation with this system of domination that the elites establish themselves as the custodians of the servant class and legitimize themselves “as the class destined” to bring modernity to the nation-states. As a “contact zone for disparate classes” operative within the closed confines of the home space away from purview of laws and regulations, servitude occasions the emergence of a diverse set of relations, experiences and affects (Hai 7). By bringing people separated by large socio-economic gulfs into physical proximity, servitude produces unsavoury experiences of humiliation, exploitation and distrust on one hand and intimacies, affections and interdependencies on the other. Domestic servitude in the Indian subcontinent denotes something far more expansive and layered than an occupational practice; it is a complex phenomenon encompassing “cultures of servitude” whereby “social relations of domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres” (Ray and Qayum 3).

It must be noted at this point that the term ‘servant’ is no way an indicator of a homogeneous category of people. Taking a cue from Ray and Qayum, this paper deploys the term ‘servant’ to denote individuals engaged in providing domestic services in lieu of some form of payment. Like any other conceptual category, servants too are marked by internal contradictions and hierarchies whereby identities of gender, caste, religion, ethnicity and age shape each individual’s experience of servitude in unique ways. Despite these differences, being imbricated within the subcontinental cultures of servitude means that servants internalise certain behavioural expectations such as self-abasement, humility, ingratiation, abnegation and indignity.

Much akin to their widespread prevalence in South Asia, servants have been a consistent presence in South Asian postcolonial literary oeuvres. Although often portrayed as marginalized and peripheral figures consigned to the background of texts, literary servants are frequently called upon to perform key “cultural, political, aesthetic, thematic” functions within the world of the text (Hai 4). A study of the depiction of literary servants alerts readers to the significance of these characters not just in terms of their diegetic functions— it provides crucial insights into the representational politics underlying any particular text. Mostly written by authors from privileged socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, representations of servants are often coloured by the authors’ elitist biases, resulting in portrayals that are largely stereotypical, derisive and essentializing, that further reinforce the society’s entrenched perceptions of these figures as the uneducated, unrefined, lesser-than-human Other of the middle and the upper classes. South Asian literary scholar Ambreen Hai has proposed a new generic category by the name “postcolonial servitude fiction” to refer to a budding corpus of Anglophone South Asian fiction that “centers, explores, and elucidates the problems of contemporary servitude and strives to develop more self-aware, ethical, and egalitarian formal techniques and strategies of representation to do so” (5). By foregrounding servants as central protagonists, these narratives probe into the interiorities and subjectivities of these lower-class figures, illuminating various facets of domestic servitude hitherto unaddressed. This present paper takes for its study three Pakistani anglophone literary texts— one novel and two short stories, namely Kamila Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron* (2000), her short story “Surface of Glass” (2008) and, Aamina Ahmad’s short story “Scar” (2008). By undertaking a close textual reading of Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron* where the upper-class protagonist’s identification of her own investment in her family’s elitist biases and discriminatory attitudes pivots on a set of crucial interactions with a number of servant figures this paper examines how the novel self-critically evaluates and interrogates the elite class’s reliance on servitude for its self-constitution. By closely reading the two short stories, both written from the perspective of two female servants, the paper delves into the uniquely individual experiences of shame, stigma, desire, aspiration, and power relations that characterize servitude. By bringing these three texts into conversation with each other, this paper seeks to challenge and rethink the established discourse surrounding domestic servants, and proposes revised and egalitarian modes of perceiving and understanding them.

At this juncture, it becomes pertinent to explain the reason behind the selection of Pakistani Anglophone fictional texts as the objects for this paper's study. The foremost reason for choosing to study fiction written by Pakistani writers would be the dearth of available scholarship on representation of domestic servitude in literature produced by these writers, even though servants proliferate in fiction produced by this nation just as much as in the works of other Indian subcontinental regions. On a representational level, domestic servants are just as much underexplored, understudied, overlooked and invisibilized as their counterparts in, say, Indian Anglophone fiction. While the shared histories of the two nations indicate that they have both inherited similar systems of servitude that have been shaped and reshaped over several centuries, perhaps most markedly by the forces of British colonialism, the coexistence of feudalism alongside late-capitalism in present-day postcolonial Pakistan has led to the predominance of a "hybridized model of domestic labour relations" that combines "'pre-capitalist paternalism' with 'market forces'" (Zulfiqar 2). Feudalism still retains a stronghold in Pakistan where the landowning class wields significant power over the administrative, judiciary and military apparatuses of the nation. Despite successive governments' attempts at restricting the power and influence of the landowning classes in the newly formed nation of Pakistan, the system of feudal land ownership has never been abolished. While scholarly opinion regarding the existence of caste system in Pakistan similar to the one found in neighbouring India remains divided, social relations in rural Pakistan have always remained predicated upon a system of *biraderi*<sup>1</sup> or kinship relations that approximate the Indian caste system in its workings (Amirali 92). Within this social organization, the lower "untouchable" castes, comprising small farmers or poor landless peasants, have toiled on the agricultural lands and provided domestic service inside the households of the upper caste landowning families, sharing a sharply unequal, multigenerational quasi kinship bond (Zulfiqar 2). This demonstrates that caste and class-based identities have been fundamental to the structuring and organisation of domestic servitude in Pakistan. With the gradual replacement of older agricultural methods with capitalist production and waged labour and the concomitant urbanization in post 1980s Pakistan, these rural landless peasants moved to the cities in large numbers as migrant labourers, taking up the roles of paid domestic workers in middle- and upper-class urban homes. (Hai 150). Such a drastic socio-economic shift has meant that employment of domestic service is no longer solely the reserve of rural landed families but has been "integrated into the urban social fabric", so that urban employers of domestic service now comprise "not just landed families with rural ties residing in the cities, but also a wide range of business, professional and middle-classes without direct economic or kinship ties to the village..." (Amirali 83). The resulting hybridised model of domestic servitude fuses "elements of rural kinship-based landlord-servant relations with new forms of depersonalized labor arrangements" (Zulfiqar 2), replacing older forms of exploitations with newer ones and rendering domestic servants increasingly precarious and disposable with the threat of dismissal from service looming large.

Contrary to the widely held and perpetuated association of domestic work with the female gender, domestic service as an occupation has historically never been the sole domain of women in the Indian subcontinent. Male servants have been a constant fixture in Pakistan and have often been recruited to perform tasks conventionally designated as "men's work" such as "the roles of maali (gardener), driver, khansama (cook), naukhar (male servant) and guard have been considered 'male' roles (at least since the colonial period) whereas care-work, nursing, laundry, dusting, serving, and housekeeping have been considered 'feminine' tasks" (Amirali 87). However, the allotment and distribution of domestic service does not follow such a fixed, straightforward, gendered logic at all times, but is rather determined on the basis of intersecting variables of skill, caste, gender and age of the particular servant to be hired.

Reading fictional work by a writer of Kamila Shamsie's reputation from an alternate vantage point has significant implications. As a cultural producer, her contribution to bringing global readership to the Pakistani Anglophone literary canon has been widely appreciated and consequently

her work has been subjected to much academic inquiry. Her first four novels, published in quick succession and largely set in “an elite Karachi of gated communities, private members’ clubs, and exclusive beaches”, closely coincide with her foray into journalistic writing that was prompted by her intention to provide “informed political and cultural commentary on Islam and Pakistan” in an effort to counter the gross misinformation about Pakistan and Pakistanis circulated by the global media during the War on Terror (Chambers 213; Tolan 2). While these four novels largely draw attention to a civilized class of Pakistani bourgeois elites, *Salt and Saffron*, most notably, is populated by a number of “minor, shadowy and generic” servant figures whose “psychologically and culturally remote” subjectivities remain underexplored within this novel as well as in scholarship on this text (Hai 51). A close analysis of such a canonical novel in tandem with two lesser known short stories that this paper considers to be examples of ‘servitude fiction’, one of which is authored by Shamsie herself, serves two purposes— firstly, it highlights a genre-based classism inherent in the differing literary treatment of domestic servants in the two different literary genres namely the novel and the short story; secondly, it seeks to supplement and in a way, upend existing modes of reading postcolonial Pakistani canonical texts, by investigating the novel from the perspectives of erstwhile invisibilized characters.

### Decoding Servitude in Literary Texts

*Salt and Saffron*, a first-person narrative, in addition its myriad thematic concerns, encapsulates the protagonist Aliya’s journey of self-critical evaluation of her own internalisation of her aristocratic family’s class prejudices through her attempts to demystify her aunt Mariam’s elopement with her family’s cook Masood, an event that is shrouded in a cloak of humiliation and infamy. As a graduate from a college in the USA with extensive ties to an estranged arm of her family settled in the UK after their separation during the partition of 1947, Aliya, much akin to the author Shamsie herself, is equipped with a transnational “insider– outsider”, “hyphenated or multiply-affiliated” perspective, that propels Aliya to gain a more nuanced understanding of these servants as individuals on one hand, and domestic servitude as an entrenched societal problem in post-colonial Pakistan on the other (Hai 143). However, as this paper will elucidate through this novel’s analysis, such an understanding is only partially achieved since the novel falls short of delving into the inner consciousness of any of its servant characters. The servants’ perspectives have only been made available in the novel through “reported dialogue... retold via an upper-class narrator” (52).

The distinction between the old feudal and the relatively liberalized outlook on domestic servitude is made manifest in the differing treatments of servants by Abida, Aliya’s grandmother and the matriarch of the family, and Aliya respectively. While the novel maintains relative silence on Abida’s education and upbringing, her aristocratic lineage provides grounds to make the educated assumption that she has been bred in the values of Muslim *sharafat*<sup>2</sup> which codified that a reformed Muslim household was one where “the domestic servants were appropriately distanced, shown their right place within the household hierarchy, and kept under constant observation”. (Bashir 515). Her carefully maintained distance from servants and her non-attribution of any individuality to these figures is made evident in her comment “Family retainers were one thing, but what reason had I to look at other people’s servants?” (Shamsie 25). Abida’s lament for her aristocratic family’s loss of former glory and the gradual waning of its illustriousness in a postcolonial Pakistan is expressed when she says, “I remember the days when servants were fired if their hands shook while they were serving food” (115). Such a statement firmly foregrounds the salience of servants in the assertion of the elite class’s social standing. Her eschewal of verbal communication in favour of an authoritative gesture while summoning the family cook is another example of her attempt at consolidating her self-identity as the superior class by way of reinforcing the servant’s subordinate status within the household hierarchy (115).

In contrast to Abida's overtly discriminatory attitudes to servant figures, the novel posits the subtler ways in which Aliya and her parents' generation participate in and conform to the society's entrenched cultures of servitude. As part of a modern urban elite society, Aliya and her parents distinguish themselves from their rural relatives on the basis of the degree of obsequiousness that they expect from servants. Her father being "struck by the deference" (152) of the servants on Jahangir's estate conveys that despite their reliance on domestic servants, Aliya's parents share a more liberalized outlook on servants. The novel is replete with references to Aliya's easy-going relationship with her family's servants and the occasional reversal of the employer-servant dynamic in the form of Aliya "chauffeuring" (186) Masood around or driving the gardener to the bus stop. Aliya's hesitant description of Masood as "virtually family" (187) conveys the upper class's deployment of kinship-based terms to designate domestic servants in order to frame this structurally unequal relationship as one of protection and dependency.

Aliya's fond description of her camaraderie with her former cook Masood is undercut with her admission- "English is the language of advancement in Karachi, and I taught Masood as much as was necessary to enable him to laugh at my jokes" (59). Such a statement is revelatory on two fronts- firstly it highlights that in conjunction with performing their assorted tasks, domestic servants are also burdened with providing affective labour for their employers' gratification; secondly, Aliya's gatekeeping of the language from her servant highlights her lack of intention in equipping him with a skill that may enhance his possibility of upward social mobility. English, in postcolonial contexts, acts as a "line of distinction based on based on linguistic discrimination" and "has continued to produced images of 'Self' and 'Other...'" (Rehman 130). As a language that is still largely the reserve of the upper classes in the postcolonial nations and is predominantly associated with the arrival of modernity in these regions, the dissemination of English to a lower-class servant threatens to confound the boundaries separating the elite employers and their premodern servants. However, the novel does provide Aliya with a redemptive opportunity when she protests against the benevolent pretensions of a distant feudal relative running for the elections: "And incidentally, in all your talk of the largesse you provide to these benighted souls, you never mentioned education. Masood so often said he wanted to learn to read and write English, and I never even offered to teach him" (Shamsie 150). While such poignant realisation of Aliya's embeddedness in cultures of domestic servitude comes from her retrospective evaluation of her interactions with Masood, Masood's own voice remains largely missing from the narrative. In the rare instances where Masood's words are made available to the reader via reported dialogue, they do not convey any protestation or discontent on his part against his subordinate status. Rather, Masood's comparison of his deftness in crafting delectable meals for Aliya's family with Ghalib's sublime verse-making relays Masood's satisfaction and sense of pride in serving Aliya's family (183).

Masood's silence in the novel is juxtaposed with the relatively greater agency that is wielded by another servant figure in the novel, namely the Hibiscus- Eating Ayah, the former caretaker of Aliya. On being informed of the Ayah's switching of her long-time employment for a more financially lucrative one, Aliya incredulously asks "You're leaving only because of money? (209). Aliya's question is followed by the Ayah's speedy retort, "Only because of money! I have two granddaughters. Their stepfather is a waster... You think I'm going to let my grandchildren grow up to be servants? (209-10). Such an assertive statement firmly foregrounds the Ayah as a desiring subject who views her occupation as a stepping stone to better social mobility for her descendants. Her aspirational stance and her "orientation towards the future" (Amirali 237) conveys her willingness to exert agency, however limited, amidst the uncertainties of her occupation and life in general. Her actions do not constitute a blatantly flagrant resistance against her employers but comprises a process of negotiation with the exploitative system of servitude, as is succinctly described by Uday Chandra:

To resist in our narrower but arguably more robust sense of the term, is therefore, to minimally apprehend the conditions of one's subordination, to endure or withstand those conditions in everyday

life, and act with sufficient intention and purpose to negotiate power relations from below in order to rework them in a more favourable or emancipatory direction (565).

While the novel's treatment of its servant figures, though somewhat distant, is generally sympathetic, in certain instances it verges on the comical, the *Niswaar*-spitting Ayah being a case in point. Her description indicates a caricaturish portrayal:

... a wizened woman who convinced me [Aliya] that my family would suffer not a whit if I regularly took a small amount of money from my father's wallet and gave it to her for her supply of *niswaar*, that ghastly, green, tobacco-based concoction which she would spit out in my basin without properly swilling out the spatter afterwards (Shamsie 207).

The employment of such a "ridiculing mode of representation" (Hai 97) is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the labelling of this character as a thief draws upon and reinforces the pervasive and firmly entrenched notion of servants as thieves<sup>3</sup> and potential criminals. The imposition of such labels on servants not only demeans and dehumanizes them (a facet of servitude that is dealt with incisively in Amina Ahmad's "Scar" discussed later in this paper) but also has deleterious consequences such as loss of employment and social ostracization. Such labelling practices constitute a controlling mechanism whereby a servant is required to repeatedly provide evidence of their honesty and loyalty in order to ward off such negative preconceived notions. Secondly, the juxtaposition of the adult Ayah's pilfering tendencies with Aliya's childish innocence further heightens the depravity of the Ayah's crime and intensifies the readers' negative perception of the character. A novel's portrayal of servant characters cannot and should not strive to be positive at all times, just as in the depiction of any other character in a novel. However, it is imperative for any fictional work to exercise caution and sensitivity in order to not slip into familiar tropes of stereotypical representation while dealing with subaltern characters. Thirdly, the Ayah's "uncouthness" (Shamsie 207) and addiction to tobacco-based substances provides a sharp contrast against which the refinement and civilization of Aliya's bourgeoisie family is amplified.

The generic category of the short story has been deemed by some scholars to be uniquely suitable for the "intensive exploration of marginal figures" (Hai 146). Taking cues from the critical appraisals of the short story form made by writers Frank O'Connor and R.K. Narayan, Ambreen Hai emphasises the genre's appropriateness in probing into the servant characters' psyches and illuminating their perspectives on the world around them. The short story's keen interest in "a submerged population group" (O'Connor 86) comprising figures such as "tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers and spoiled priests" (88) coupled with its shorter length "where a whole lifetime must be crowded in a few minutes" (89) allows for a brief and intense exploration of the human psyche within a smaller expanse. A similar view regarding the short story's aptness for dealing with marginal lives is echoed by R. K. Narayan when he opines:

... I realized that the short story is the best medium for utilizing the wealth of subjects available. A novel is a different proposition altogether, centralized as it is on a major theme, leaving out, necessarily, a great deal of the available material on the periphery. Short stories on the other hand, can cover a wider field by presenting concentrated miniatures of human experience in all its opulence (viii).

The two short stories namely "Surface of Glass" and "Scar" that are to be discussed in this section serve as prime examples of servitude fiction. Centered on two female domestic servants named Razia and Kaakee respectively whose stories are told through third-person narrative voices, these two fictional texts depict their marginal conditions and illuminate their complex subjectivities situated and shaped at the intersection of systemic, social, material conditions and inner turmoils.

"Surface of Glass" provides a glimpse into the micropolitics between servants working within the same household, by focusing on Razia's mounting suspicion against the newly employed cook. Razia, serving her employers in the capacity of an Ayah (caretaker for the children) and a house-



keeper is acutely aware of her lower placement within the servants' hierarchical order as compared to the cook. Her inferior positioning builds up misplaced resentment against her fellow worker that is captured succinctly in the words: "She also didn't know why the new cook hated her so much. But among all the not knowing there was this piece of knowing: that he did hate her" (Shamsie, "Surface of Glass" 316). The instability of Razia's current employment tenure is made painfully clear when the elder daughter of the family comments "Why do I need an ayah now at this age, when I am old enough for lipstick and even a little rouge?" (317) Razia's acute sense of shame in being reminded of her disposable status within the household that too within the cook's earshot is pithily but poignantly conveyed in her meek question- "so why did the daughter have to say it when he was listening?" (317)

Razia's sheer powerlessness against her employers' tacit threat of termination and her financial distress gets further redirected towards the cook who is held responsible for thwarting her son's promotion in a job. Dubbing the cook as the "devil's helpmate" (318), Razia pins the blame of her son's misfortune on the cook's imagined disruption of her prayer session by "smoothen[ing]ed the mat and let[ting] the devil sit on it" (317). In desperation, Razia reaches out to a village *hakim*, an Islamic spiritual healer and physician, to undo the effects of the cook's supposed black magic. A notable feature of Razia's speech and actions throughout the short story is her repeated use of religious rhetoric such as "Allah's will" (318), the Devil, and the incorporation of other concomitant religious gestures and practices. Alia Amirali's ethnographic study on Pakistani domestic servants' yields crucial insight in this regard:

At the level of the self, religious discourse appears to be one of the core conceptual vocabularies deployed by my interlocutors to establish their place (and that of others) in the world, to elevate, ascribe, describe, and claim worth in moral and social terms, as individuals and as collectives (182).

This particular short story redeploys the existing stereotype of the servant as the backward and premodern Other entrenched in superstitions in order to invert the readers' gaze toward the steep socio-economic uncertainties that render these poor people precarious and the fundamentally flawed society that stigmatizes them. By turning to religiosity in order to offset her life's overwhelming odds, Razia makes use of possibly "the only form of social capital" (182) that is available to her as a servant.

Despite the contingent nature of her employment and being considered dispensable by her employers, Razia harbours a sense of paradoxical loyalty towards her employers and an earnest concern for their well-being. She blows "prayers around the house, both outside and inside" lest her employers also be the unwitting victims of the new cook's nefarious machinations (Shamsie, "Surface of Glass" 318). Her praying "twice around the bed of the younger daughter who didn't wear lipstick yet" betrays her maternal love for her employer's wards coupled with the painful realisation of the inevitability of her dismissal from service once the younger daughter grows old enough (318). Her engagement in praying for her son's promotion and her employers' family indicates, on her part, a dissolution of the boundary separating her own family and that of the employers. This act of praying for her employers' well-being suggests Razia's emotional commitment to the family that transcends beyond what the terms of her service dictate or her meagre salary can recompense.

Whereas "Surface of Glass" deals with the psychological turmoil of a domestic servant in her precarious occupation, Aamina Ahmad's "Scar" offers a profound exploration of a maidservant's daughter's growing awareness of her own place in the world vis-a-vis the erosion of her friendship with her employer's daughter, wrought by the enormous class divide between them. Once a playmate and close friend to the employer's daughter, Aalia whose secrets and teenage romantic fancies she had happily taken part in, Kaakee, now a young woman ruminates on how their lives' trajectories have diverged. The short story probes into a child Kaakee's awareness of the steeply unequal nature of their friendship:

She remembered sitting in Aalia's room with her friends knowing, as she sat there, what a privilege it was to be included... She would sit on the floor, a little apart, ready to bring in the trolley with snacks for them... justifying her presence... It didn't matter. She was there" (Ahmad 351).

This passage explicates a young Kaakee's unencumbered attitude to this cross-class friendship and how any incipient sense of shame in the child's mind is overpowered by her euphoria in being privy to the activities and pastimes of her friend. Her naive hope in the permanence of this friendship is coupled with her internalisation of her own servile and subordinate status within the household owing to her being the child of a maidservant. The passage also highlights how the logic of spatial segregation is an important component of domestic servitude and is essential to the demarcation and maintenance of a boundary between an employer and their servant.

The narrative sensitively portrays Kaakee's feelings of shame and stigma in her identity as a servant that intensify as she steps into adulthood. These feelings of shame are conveyed in the story through references to subtle self-conscious gestures on Kaakee's part such as tugging at her Kameez or being hyper aware of her own body odour in Aalia's friend's presence. (348)

The story also engages with a servant's aspiration for a fulfilling domestic life, an aspect that remains somewhat missing from the two other narratives that this paper has studied. In Kaakee's case, her desire for marriage indicates a longing for companionship on one hand and a life of "personal freedom, mobility, leisure, socialising and autonomy" (Amirali 241) on the other, experiences that are denied to her in her life in servitude. Kaakee and her mother's yearning for "clean-looking men with six-weekly haircuts, a profession and Rs 2000 a month" (Ahmad 348) as a prospective husband for Kaakee is situated in a wider Pakistani social discourse where the ability to provide for a wife at home is held to be a desirable trait in a good husband. While Kaakee's desire for a marriage might appear counterproductive since it involves exchanging the exploitative institution of domestic servitude for the patriarchal institution of a marriage, this desire has to be understood as situated in a context where marriage constitutes one of the few possible conduits available to escape the "gendered unfreedoms of everyday life" (Amirali 240). Marriage, in the South Asian context in general and the Pakistani context in particular, is considered to be an idealised goal for the majority of women across all classes, as is expressed in the narrative through the arrangements that are in full swing for Aalia's impending wedding. By foregrounding herself as a desiring being, Kaakee lays claim to a selfhood beyond her subservient status and urges the story's readers to recognise and consider her as a full human being.

In conjunction with being attentive to the inner psyche of Kaakee, the narrative also draws attention to a gritty reality of the lives of domestic servants. When an expensive necklace gifted by Aalia's in-laws goes missing, both Aalia and her mother suspect Kaakee to have stolen the piece of jewellery. Even before the blame is verbally pinned on her, Kaakee feels the surveilling gaze of her employers on her back— "She swallowed, there was only one explanation now for why the jewelry hadn't been found. She thought she could hear Baaji and Aalia talking softly to each other" (Ahmad 355). Despite her long association with Aalia's family, "cleaning it [their house] since she was eight" (355), she is not afforded a chance to plead her innocence and is preemptively labelled a thief. The almost instant shift in Aalia's mother's demeanor towards Kaakee after the necklace goes missing signifies the volatility of the employer-servant relationship where the affective ties of trust, affection and intimacy can be withdrawn by the employer at any given moment, even without concrete proof of a servant's infraction. The combined feelings of shame, anger, betrayal, grief and helplessness transforms Kaakee's mental anguish into a physical sensation, manifesting as a "searing pain in her chest" (356). 'It is ironic enough that after the completion of the whole ordeal, instead of extending comfort to her own daughter, Kaakee's mother expresses gratitude towards Aalia's mother's munificence in not filing a police complaint against Kaakee (357). On one hand this demonstrates the absolute and utter power that an employer has the ability to wield on the life and destiny of a servant, and on the other it highlights the "expectations of servility, self-abasement, ingratiating, subordination, indignity" that are a part and parcel of a life in domestic servitude (Hai 6).

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to break fresh ground by re-reading a Pakistani anglophone canonical novel from the perspective of domestic servitude in conjunction with a close analysis of two short stories that exemplify the emerging category of servitude fiction. The reading of *Salt and Saffron* conducted in this paper has elucidated that despite domestic servitude not being one of the central thematic concerns of the novel, domestic servants essay a range of diegetic roles in shaping and interrogating the identities and class consciousnesses of the protagonist and her family. This demonstrates that employing the analytical lens of domestic servitude not only provides a valuable entry-point in expanding existing interpretations of canonical texts, it also interrogates classist modes of representation and paves the way for newer, more egalitarian modes to emerge. The analysis of the short stories “Surface of Glass” and “Scar” illuminates the inner consciousnesses of two servant figures. While literary servants may not be the exact reflections of real-world domestic servants, servitude fiction provides a crucial terrain for the expression and exploration of complex subjectivities of these otherwise invisibilized figures, in ways that might challenge and revise the homogenising and dominant perceptions about them.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Biraderi* meaning ‘brotherhood’ is the local term used in Pakistan to designate patrilineal, endogamous kinship groups which form crucial structuring components in Pakistan’s rural social order. Other closely linked terms include *zaat* (ancestry, caste) and *quom* (tribe, sect, nation). For more on *biraderi* as caste and class categorisation, see Channa, *Four Essays on Education, Caste and Collective Action in Rural Pakistan*.
- <sup>2</sup> *Sharafat* primarily meaning ‘respectability’, an idea that was closely associated with Islamic reformism and Islamic modernity in pre-partition India. For more on *sharafat* as a codifying principle for gendered organisation of space, see Faisal Fatehali Devji.
- <sup>3</sup> Such notion of servants as thieves is not just particular to the South Asian context, but has prevalence all around the world, such as in the case of migrant Irish women servants employed in the US (see Andrew Urban) or domestic servants in Greece (see Pothiti Hanzaroula).

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# Book Reviews

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THE ART AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE GARDEN. By David Fenner and Ethan Fenner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 392 pp.

David Fenner and Ethan Fenner's *The Art and Philosophy of the Garden* offers a comprehensive and thoughtful exploration of the garden as a cultural artifact and an aesthetic phenomenon. The authors blend ecology, philosophy, and art theory to present gardens as both a cultivated space and an aesthetic "object" in its own right. Above all, the book is systematic.

Chapter One presents a survey of methodologies by which one might define the garden (e.g., etymologically, historically, linguistically). In his acknowledgments, David Fenner writes that Mara Miller's *The Garden as an Art* (a book which inspired this project and is extensively cited) "largely had to invent the discussions" (vii) regarding gardens in contemporary scholarship. The framework for considerations of the garden and questions about the garden as an artform presented by this book both continues this process of invention and perceptively addresses previous work, including that of Miller, David Cooper, John Dixon Hunt, Michael G. Lee, and Stephanie Ross; the considerations of Miller and Cooper in the first chapter (5–9) are particularly insightful. The book draws from a wide range of sources, including ancient philosophy, Enlightenment thought, and contemporary ecology; its discussion of gardens is highly cosmopolitan—the taxonomy in the first chapter is valuably thorough, with gardens throughout Japan, the Middle East, and the West being held as exemplary—and the principles by which it defines "the Garden" and argues for the aesthetic value thereof are carefully kept in line so as to avoid overgeneralization and remain applicable across cultural contexts. The book succeeds in establishing the garden as an aesthetic "object" with appropriate reference to a number of aesthetic theories. Indeed, the book surveys a great variety of perspectives regarding definitions and interpretations of the garden. The authors acknowledge the arguability of certain points, e.g., the applicability of mimetic or expressivist theories of aesthetics to gardens (122), the evaluation of particular gardens as works of art (209), and the garden in relation to other artforms (74–75; 322), but such points are rare. The book is at its strongest when distilling and clarifying previous conversations, e.g., the elaboration on Miller's comments regarding potential forgery of the garden and the conclusion that such a process could create a "twin" (54–55), on discussions of cognitive engagement in Cooper and Miller (95–96), and the synthesis of Angela Kallhoff and Maria Schörgenhumer with Isis Brook and Damon Young in a section on the ethics of the garden (325–326). Such moments are well-argued, leading into highly original conclusions and useful terminological distinctions which will undoubtedly influence scholarship on the aesthetics of gardens. Throughout the book, the authors' conclusions are neatly charted (e.g., 199–201; 339–341). These charts are wonderfully readable additions, and their summarization of the book's conclusions will be a boon to future scholars.

The authors argue that gardens function not only as expressions of cultural identity but also as active participants in the creation and reinforcement of that identity. They assert that "garden styles not only express the cultures of which they are part; they reinforce and reestablish their cultures, providing a means of cultural identification that spans the life of the garden both as a physical garden and as part of a cultural history" (xiv). This view aligns with the larger thesis that gardens are not static objects but rather dynamic expressions of the values, traditions, and historical processes from which they emerge; we are told, aphoristically, that "It is likely better to say of gardens that they are



four-dimensional places” (44). Simultaneously, the spatial haecceity of the garden is emphasized: “A garden is not merely sited on a place; a garden is a place” (39). This latter argument strengthens the overall thesis that a garden is an aesthetic “object” while acknowledging the uncontrollability and intrinsic change of the garden as a point of differentiation from other media. Gardens reflect the aesthetic, social, and environmental forces of their time in a fashion which is distinct from other artforms. The book emphasizes how gardens operate as powerful symbols and practices of cultural engagement. It must be noted that while the Fenners effectively map gardens as tools of cultural identification, inquiry into how gardens might *reshape* culture or contest existing cultural norms falls outside the purview of this book. Certain points, such as a subsection on “Public Access,” (186–7) or the acknowledgment that “massive English landscapes...require enormous wealth to maintain” (97) lend themselves to possible elaboration, perhaps with recourse to (for example) Frederick Law Olmsted’s writings on greenspace accessibility or John Berger’s remarks on the connections between landscape painting—a point of comparison in the authors’ analysis (74–75)—and property. The fact that such connections are not drawn speaks, above all, to the book’s systematicity and focus. Such moments are another promising indication that *The Art and Philosophy of the Garden* will enrich future scholarship in the growing field of garden studies. The book is ambitious, richly layered, and offers fresh insights into the intersection of culture, ecology, and aesthetics. It is a thought-provoking work that will be valuable to scholars and readers interested in the significance of gardens as aesthetic objects.

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BEYOND HOSTILE ISLANDS: THE PACIFIC WAR IN AMERICAN AND NEW ZEALAND FICTION WRITING. By Daniel McKay. New York: Fordham University Press, 2024. 240 pp.

Daniel McKay’s *Beyond Hostile Islands* examines American and New Zealand fiction writings from the early 1960s to the present day. His book offers an insightful and perceptive analysis of a wide range of literary texts about the Second World War and its aftermath, especially focusing on the Pacific theater by invoking the memory of both well-known histories and suppressed histories of the war. Through an engaging comparative analysis of mainstream American and marginalized New Zealand war literature and their narrative forms and valences, McKay foregrounds varied topics such as combat, internment, propaganda, and nuclear weapons, as well as asymmetrical power relations between nations and their effects on representations of racial, ethnic, cultural, and national identities. His incisive analysis of Pacific War literature throws into sharp relief not only the less examined areas of literary history such as racialized stereotypes of the Japanese and the fear in America, or the West, created by Japan’s meteoric economic rise in the 1980s, but also American literary works’ deliberate evasion of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their devastating effects in those two cities and the country.

In the immediate aftermath of a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government, which had previously favored isolationist policies, launched propaganda campaigns against the Japanese and used racial stereotypes to portray them as nonhumans, comparing them to animals, insects, rodents, and reptiles. More strikingly, however, these literary or cultural representations of Japanese people stood “in marked contrast to the more conventional objectification of the German enemy in war-time propaganda, which clearly distinguished between the Nazi leadership and ‘good Germans,’ a model that tended to hold true throughout the British Dominions as well” (2). Here Edward Said’s notion of the Orient or the Other is both salient and yet limited, for the propaganda posters of the Second World War depicted the Japanese not just as others in the Saidian sense but as nonhumans –

an indubitable form of objectification, but one that goes beyond East vs. West binaries. Hence, American soldiers “actively look forward to killing Japanese,” whereas “most did only their professional duty by killing Germans” (2). Against this backdrop, McKay poses an intriguing question: could a sense of New Zealand’s geographical isolation “develop a war literature canon in ways that were less disposed to the tropes and ideologies commonly found in American writing?” (4). Another way of putting this would be whether a New Zealand provincialism offers a vantage point to view US literature and culture. New Zealand war narratives, McKay opines, are not always modeled on American war narratives despite their heavy influences on them. Interestingly, he shows how stories of Allied Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs) and Japanese American internment narratives are often overlooked, and yet play a significant role in combat narratives (6). Even so, McKay avers that the branches of literature – Australian, British, Canadian, New Zealand, et al. – ultimately defer to the American canon as it emerged from the Second World War.

*Beyond Hostile Islands* contains five chapters, and each chapter discusses a specific genre of Pacific War literature and key American and New Zealand texts. For instance, the first chapter examines the combat novel of the 1960s in which combat is a central narrative component in most major novels. McKay then moves on to what some would call the corporate thriller, a continuation of the same novelistic form that “emerged as a genre . . . pertinent to Japan” (59). He further delineates how the period of the 1940s through the early 1960s saw a veritable spate of combat-themed works, such as that of New Zealand author Errol Brathwaite in his novel *An Affair of Men* (1962). Other influential New Zealand works of later vintage include Keri Hulme’s “Kaibutsu-san” (1985), Wendy Catran’s *The Swap* (2004), Peter Wells’ *Lucky Bastard* (2007), and James George’s *Ocean Roads* (2006). McKay observes how “[t]he phenomenon of ‘Japan-bashing,’ as Japanophobic discourses tended to be called in mainstream media, received its first critical examination during the 1990s, particularly in David Morley and Kevin Robins’ coauthored study *Spaces of Identity* (1995),” which coined “the newly emergent phenomenon known as techno-Orientalism” (59). This “techno-Orientalist imaginary” then constructed East Asian societies as following the same “developmental trajectory” of the West, rather than showing them as “timeless and changeless” cultures and peoples (60). Chapter 3 analyzes internment novels that narrate the story of Japanese civilians/minorities in New Zealand and the US, along with those of the small island communities of the South Pacific – again, a topic that remains relatively underexplored. Prisoner-of-War (POW) testimonies, chiefly characterized by the experiences of silences, traumas, and memories, constitute another branch of captivity narrative. McKay’s final two chapters explore diverse POW narratives and Manhattan Project novels, respectively, paying special attention to the figures of prisoner, the scientist, and *hibakusha* or the atomic bomb survivor, as well as their literary and cultural representations.

Above all, McKay’s *Beyond Hostile Islands* is a great addition to contemporary global Anglophone literature, especially contributing to a new conversation about American and New Zealand island literatures. His comparative interpretive paradigm offers a fresh and thought-provoking analysis of the Pacific War accounts in Anglophone literature. While grounding his literary and cultural analysis in historical and theoretical ideas ranging from Edward Said’s Orientalism, Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, memory studies, and Elizabeth Deloughrey’s environmental idea of “tidalectics,” McKay’s book examines both major American and marginal New Zealand and Japanese fictional writings to map out divergent trajectories of war narratives (170–71). The US–New Zealand juxtaposition is more unsettling and messier than one would think, in that it does not necessarily align with continental worldviews and in that war narratives may, or may not be, shaped by the geographical separateness and dominant American literary, cultural, and politico-historical views.

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INDIANS ON INDIAN LANDS: INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, CASTE, AND INDIGENEITY.  
By Nishant Upadhyay. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2024. 256 pp.

Nishant Upadhyay in the book *Indians on Indian Lands* offers learned meditations and provocations to readers interested in the doubleness of the term “Indian” in North America. The designation, which could refer to Native American people and the Indian diaspora at once in the aforesaid context, allows Upadhyay to bring together scholarship on race, caste, coloniality and indigeneity generatively. In this regard, they accomplish a number of well-timed tasks. First of all, Upadhyay provides a lexicon to probe the nebulous phenomenon of Indian cultural ascendancy in North America, demystifying the caste-based politics that undergirds it. Secondly, they bring to light anew, the transnational circulation of capital. Thirdly, they problematize the assumed minoritized and consequently, vulnerable position of the Indian diaspora in the First World. Finally, they ruminate the possibilities of solidarities while acknowledging their limits between the two Indian communities they study.

By foregrounding caste, Upadhyay rejects the homogenization of the Indian (and the South Asian) diaspora, linking it to the settler colonialist practices of dominant caste Indians in Canada. These practices, carried out in concert with the putatively multicultural Canadian State reveal the enduring legacy of coloniality in governance and the mobilization of one racialized minority against another. Yet, Upadhyay’s scholarship is polyvalent. The book begins with a recounting of the *Komagata Maru* incident, where 376 South Asian men, aboard the ship, *Komagata Maru* were denied entry by Canada. In response, the Musqueam leaders said that if they had control over their lands, they would not have turned the migrants away. After this hopeful premise of solidarity, Upadhyay, deftly switches to the *Komagata Maru* centenary event, where the only Native presence was the photographer, the Native staff serving South Asian food and Musqueam singers in their traditional wear performing in front of the guests. This juxtaposition reveals a concerning phenomenon— where dominant caste Indians who have settled on Native lands dominate the memorialization of a noteworthy Indian-Indian interaction in the past, positioning themselves in the mainstream and joining the Canadian state in marginalizing the Natives. This catalyzes a chain reaction in the book, as Upadhyay wades through the intricacies of exchanges between these communities, and the persistent realities of settler colonialism, ethnonationalist purism, anti-blackness, heteropatriarchy and violence in the Canadian nation-state.

In the first chapter, “Unsettling Brahminism”, Upadhyay draws attention to “caste-maneuvers” of upper-caste Indian diasporic scholars, or the obscuring of caste in their academic presence and self-fashioning. This leads them to speak of how Indian-centric postcolonial theory, while adequately critiquing European colonialism, fails to reckon with and decenter brahminism, constructing homogenous colonized and postcolonial subjects. Caste obfuscation in the academic world takes place through the cosmopolitanization of postcolonial analytics. This is also tied to an aspiration to whiteness, Upadhyay argues, tracing the predominance of dependence on white theorists in the citational practices of savarna scholars, with a convenient exclusion of non-Savarna philosophers such as Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar. Simultaneously, Upadhyay draws attention to the engagements between Black and Dalit writers, as a counterweight to the hegemonic model of Indian-centred postcoloniality. The latter, as they adequately explain, relies on the homogeneity of the Indian postcolonial subject, read from discursive apparatus inaugurated in the work of Black scholars, and causes the misconstruing of the Black colonized subject as a model to think of the universal brown subject.

Racialized immigrants traverse the regimes of citizenship asymmetrically, even as Canada’s extractive economy welcomes immigrant labour. An aspiration to citizenship turns racialized immigrants, who could be possible allies with indigenous people, into accomplices of the settler state. In the second chapter of the book, “Steady Workers”, Upadhyay deals with the making of the “model minority” Asian and the “unmodel” Native myths. Beginning with an anecdote about a Sikh man

calling another Sikh man a native American as a derogatory term, with negative stereotypes attached to it, the chapter documents many pertinent case studies that illustrate the complicity of Asian labour in an ethnic othering. Interestingly, the chapter extends beyond the declared project of the book to describe the model Asian immigrant stigmatizing “unmodel” Black communities in Canada. At the same time, it details solidarity, despite othering, between Sikh and indigenous women workers to invoke concerns of gender. This chapter is a magnificent achievement in locating multifaceted relationalities. It reveals to the reader, particularly because it is followed by a relatively cynical first chapter, the balance Upadhyay endeavours to strike between hope and despair in thinking about differences, while rigorously pursuing exemplary research in the Social Sciences.

Chapter three begins with an anecdote again, illustrating how the author’s surname opens up a world of access and intimacy within the domestic space of a successful conservative Indian diasporic family. The logic of purity that structures caste-d behaviour is shown at play in the North American continent. This chapter, fittingly titled “Other Indians” employs an anti-caste analytic to show how the indigenous other, i.e., the native gets conflated with the Indian other, i.e., the non-Savarna. These practices are chronicled, keeping in sight, the large-scale Hindutva movement gaining traction in the continent, which is premised on a singular, uni-cultural imagination of Indianness, and the academic project of Indic Studies, establishing a model of decolonization based on the aforesaid homogeneity.

The pre-conclusion, fourth chapter delves into the domain of intimacy. “Colonial Intimacies” opens with a dialogue between an Indian Muslim man and an indigenous woman where the latter is subjected to denigrating stereotypes at a date. Arguing via Nayan Shah, Upadhyay deploys “stranger intimacy”, as encounters that either fortified or destabilized social hierarchies through relationalities to examine what they call *colonial* instead of interracial relations. Without denying the space for agency and creative fashionings of relationships, Upadhyay looks at how “the trajectories of these intimacies are scripted through settler-colonial logic” (118). This is also a significant chapter for literary scholars, as it bases its theorization upon short stories by the Cree writer Tomson Highway and Punjabi writer Sadhu Binning. The relationships depicted in these stories are marked by hauntings of the violent past and the pursuing of intimacies in this context, makes them both haunting and haunted, which Upadhyay uses to construct a larger argument about the same, demonstrating it through a fastidious reading of literature, history and field-notes.

Finally, the book culminates on a note of optimism, despite the author’s declared academic pessimism at multiple points. Through recorded statements, the author muses about the younger generations being invested in *Indian-Indian* solidarities, as unlike the older generations, they may not experience a struggle to claim belonging to the settler state despite racial violence and can bring about “decolonial alliances” (151) in the face of impossible relationalities. This is the larger tone of Upadhyay’s work, with the notion that, “complicity and solidarity are not binaries” (15). While implicating savarna scholars and outlining colonial incommensurabilities, Upadhyay, steers clear of projects of shaming and does not make the case for summarily rejecting Indian-centric postcolonial/transnational scholarship. This makes their work a peri-optimistic, or a somewhat hopeful attempt to imagine the future with new/better ethics.

The significance of this book for literary studies can be gleaned from a comparison with what the inaugural manoeuvres of postcolonial theory did to the canon. After the rise of colonial discourse analysis, it became fairly common to read *Mansfield Park* differently, with special attention to how Sir Thomas Bertram’s wealth in the text is derived from his colonial possessions, including a sugar plantation in Antigua run by slave labour. After *Indians on Indian Lands*, celebrated works such as *The Namesake* might be read differently as well. In general, this book is a necessary introduction to critically think about Indian (and South Asian) presence in literature, film and the other arts in a globalizing world.

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THE CULMINATION: HEIDEGGER, GERMAN IDEALISM, AND THE FATE OF PHILOSOPHY. By Robert B. Pippin. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024. 256 pp.

Robert B. Pippin's *The Culmination* constitutes a meticulous examination of Heidegger's philosophical stance in conjunction with German Idealism, specifically in relation to the works of Hegel and Kant. A pivotal element of Pippin's argumentation is the assertion that Heidegger regarded Hegel as the apex of the Western metaphysical lineage, a lineage that, according to Heidegger, has neglected the quintessential inquiry of philosophy: What is the meaning of Being? This oversight is characterized by Heidegger as a deficiency that imparts a completed nature to Hegel's philosophical framework, consequently obscuring the essence of philosophical inquiry. The objective of this volume is to chronicle the development of Heidegger's engagement with and transcendence over that tradition, as articulated by Pippin.

Pippin scrutinizes Heidegger's interpretation of Hegel's Science of Logic, which he posits as the most coherent articulation of the philosophical alignment of being with knowability. As Pippin articulates, "For Heidegger, Hegel had taken that mostly implicit assumption as far as it could be taken, and so was its 'culmination' in the claim that the Absolute had been achieved" (Pippin, 2024, p. x). Pippin contends that Heidegger perceives such fulfillment as problematic, as it suggests that all contradictions have been harmonized, reconciled, or synthesized away, thus precluding any further inquiry. According to Heidegger, Hegel's belief in attaining absolute knowledge is flawed; he argues that there has always been a more pressing question concerning being that Western philosophy has failed to tackle since the pre-Socratic times (Pippin, 2024, p. 3).

Pippin meticulously delineates the essence of Heidegger's critique of metaphysical reasoning. Heidegger posits that Hegel's equation of Being with comprehensibility—whereby existence is equated with cognition—has resulted in an "encroachment in the very core" of human existence. Pippin observes that Heidegger contended that "being qua being should be understood as intelligibility and ultimately, in principle, knowability," a stance that Pippin asserts Heidegger dismissed as a manifestation of hyper-rationalism: "cannot claim to comprehend all that there meaningfully is and could be" (Pippin, 2024, p. xi). Heidegger argues that such a methodological approach neglects the finite nature of human existence, thereby reducing being to a mere collection of conceptual categories, rather than engaging with a more primordial lived experience of being that transcends discursive knowledge (Pippin, 2024, p. 9).

A notable strength of Pippin's academic investigation lies in his examination of Heidegger's ambivalent relationship with Kant. Initially, Heidegger extols Kant for acknowledging the inherent limitations of human consciousness; however, he ultimately critiques Kant for not fully grasping the profound implications of this recognition. Pippin illustrates this separation, noting that Heidegger deemed Kant as 'the inception of German Idealism,' while at the same moment recognizing him as a philosopher who "did not effectively present the dilemma of human finitude" (Pippin, 2024, p. 6). Heidegger asserts that Kant remained ensconced within the metaphysical paradigm, presupposing that being could be entirely comprehended through human cognition, thereby failing to interrogate the foundational inquiry concerning the essence of being itself. (Pippin, 2024, p. 31).

Pippin dedicates considerable attention to Heidegger's interpretation of Hegel as the "culminator" of this metaphysical lineage. Pippin posits that Heidegger regarded Hegel's Logic as the definitive expression of the Western philosophical tradition's conviction that reality could be thoroughly comprehended through conceptual reasoning. Pippin articulates, "For Heidegger, this culmination allowed us to see, in its very radicality and ambition, the disclosure of the inner dynamic of all Western philosophy" (Pippin, 2024, p. x). Heidegger argued that Hegel's attempt to equate thinking with being culminated in the assertion that philosophy had achieved absolute knowledge, a claim



that Heidegger deemed both perilous and misleading (Pippin, 2024, p. 7). Heidegger maintained that conflating being with knowability disregarded the finitude and historical context of human existence, thereby reducing the intricacies of lived experience to mere abstract notions (Pippin, 2024, p. 31).

Regardless of Pippin's capable depiction of Heidegger's critique regarding Hegel's metaphysical constructs, there are cases where his scrutiny does not sufficiently encompass certain layers of Heidegger's philosophical approach. For instance, while Pippin acknowledges Heidegger's emphasis on Dasein, the being that interrogates Being, he does not rigorously analyze the distinctions between Heidegger's existential phenomenology and Hegel's idealism. Heidegger's focus on Dasein—the entity for whom Being poses an inquiry—constitutes the bedrock of his critique of Hegel's philosophical system. Pippin points out Heidegger's claim that Hegel missed recognizing 'the essential limits of human existence' (Pippin, 2024, p. 10); nonetheless, delving deeper into how Heidegger's idea of Dasein starkly opposes Hegel's rationalist philosophy would have strengthened the case. Pippin employs a thorough and meticulously crafted methodological approach, substantially engaging with primary texts authored by Heidegger and Hegel. His interpretation of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics is anchored in rigorous textual analysis, particularly of *Being and Time* and subsequent writings. Pippin observes that Heidegger's investigation of the "forgetting of Being" in *Being and Time* anticipates his later critique of Hegel (Pippin, 2024, p. 173). Pippin delivers a holistic interpretation of Heidegger's philosophical quest by aligning his reflections with the vast narrative of German Idealism. His interaction with key primary materials, particularly Heidegger's insights on Kant and Hegel, adds considerable weight to his position, indicating a sincere immersion in the philosophical lineage.

Pippin's scholarly endeavor significantly augments the discourse surrounding Heidegger and German Idealism. Through his scrutiny of Heidegger's review of Hegel, a new lens is provided on the relationship between these two notable philosophers, illustrating how Heidegger not only takes on but also attempts to move past the dominant metaphysical legacy. Pippin contends that Heidegger perceived Hegel as the philosopher who "culminated" the philosophical tradition, whilst simultaneously exposing its intrinsic limitations by failing to probe into the question of Being (Pippin, 2024, p. 3). This conclusion constitutes a notable contribution of the text, presenting a fresh viewpoint on Heidegger's significance within the historical trajectory of philosophy.

*The Culmination* emerges as a rigorous and intellectually rich text that is likely to attract scholars with interests in Heidegger, Hegel, and German Idealism. Pippin's scrupulous and systematic approach provides a clear and comprehensive analysis of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, thus rendering it an indispensable resource for individuals seeking to grasp the progression of Western philosophical thought. Nonetheless, given the elaborate characteristics of the topic, the book might be found to be less approachable for individuals who lack familiarity with the intricacies involved in these philosophical discussions. For academics knowledgeable about Heidegger and German Idealism, Pippin's examination provides a significant and intriguing look at how metaphysics is treated in current philosophical debates.

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SEEING MORE: KANT'S THEORY OF IMAGINATION. By Samantha Matherne. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 448 pp.

Samantha Matherne's *Seeing More: Kant's Theory of Imagination* represents a significant intervention in contemporary Kantian scholarship by advancing a systematic interpretation of

imagination's role across Kant's theoretical, aesthetic, and practical philosophy. Challenging traditional views of imagination as mere fantasy, Matherne argues for its centrality in Kant's cognitive architecture, presenting it as a flexible and unified faculty essential to perception, moral deliberation, and aesthetic engagement. Drawing on the *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR), *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (CPJ), and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Anthro), as well as unpublished lecture notes, Matherne constructs a comprehensive framework that situates imagination as indispensable to human cognition and agency. This review critically evaluates her interpretive framework, methodological rigour, and contributions to both historical and contemporary philosophical debates.

Although Matherne's project is ambitious and well-timed, this review argues that her interpretations, though very insightful, sometimes reach beyond the reasonable limit in their efforts to show imagination as a coherent faculty throughout Kant's philosophical system. The second part of the critique points to her methodological choices, her approach to both original and secondary sources, and her engagement with Kant's idea of imagination within broader philosophical contexts.

Matherne's primary claim that imagination operates as a unified faculty throughout Kant's philosophy is a bold and provocative intervention. She situates imagination as a "spontaneous sensory activity" that mediates between intuition and understanding (p. 69). This reading aligns with Kant's assertion of the "common but unknown root" of sensibility and understanding (CPR A15/B29). Nonetheless, her unique association of imagination with sensibility (p. 68) presents interpretative difficulties, especially when considered alongside Beatrice Longuenesse's assertion that the spontaneity of imagination obscures the distinction between sensibility and understanding.

Another strength is her treatment of transcendental schematism—the mechanism by which pure concepts are rendered applicable to intuitions (pp. 212–249). However, she leaves unresolved questions about how imagination functions alongside the unity of apperception. Further engagement with Kant's "categories of the understanding" (CPR A80/B106) could clarify her position.

Matherne's analysis of imagination in Kant's aesthetics is a standout contribution. She emphasizes its dual role in facilitating the free play of faculties and expanding conceptual horizons in the experience of beauty and sublimity (p. 299). This interpretation resonates with Kant's claim that imagination provides "unsought extensive, undeveloped material for the understanding" (CPJ 5:317).

However, her emphasis on the "subjective orientation" of aesthetic imagination invites critique. By framing the aesthetic domain as primarily subjective, Matherne risks underplaying its systematic integration into Kant's larger philosophical project, which, though illuminating, requires a deeper consideration of how aesthetic judgment serves as a crucial bridge within Kant's broader philosophical architecture. This limitation becomes particularly evident when considered alongside Paul Guyer's seminal work "Kant and the Claims of Taste" (1997), which demonstrates how aesthetic judgment, through the principle of purposiveness, functions as an essential mediating link between nature's lawfulness in the first Critique and moral freedom in the second Critique. Similarly, Henry Allison's "Kant's Theory of Taste" (2001) is another example that offers crucial insights into how the apparently subjective character of aesthetic judgment points toward an intersubjective validity that addresses the fundamental question of nature's amenability to our cognitive and practical aims.

She sheds new light on Kant's practical philosophy by reconstructing the role of moral imagination. As she argues, imagination concretizes ethical concepts and realizes moral ideals, though Kant himself is cautious about sensibility's influence on moral reasoning (p. 339). This fits in with his discussions of moral exemplars and the highest good (CPR A820/B848).

Nevertheless, her reconstruction may overemphasize the significance of imagination within practical reasoning. Kant's cautions regarding the tendency of sensibility to compromise rational autonomy (Groundwork 4:398) are not adequately considered. Although imagination might aid in moral understanding, its subservience to reason ought to remain a focal point in any Kantian framework.

Matherne's concluding arguments about imagination's relevance to contemporary philosophy are compelling. She connects Kantian ideas of imagination to contemporary dialogues in phenom-

enology, moral psychology, and theories of perception (p. 392). For example, the argument that imagination is a base for cognitive flexibility fits with discussions in cognitive science about mental representation and modal reasoning.

Still, her contact with contemporary theories, such as phenomenology, from scholars like Shaun Gallagher or Alva Noë remains cursory at best. More extensive interactions between disciplines would further elevate the potential applicability of her Kantian framework to modern contexts.

Matherne's method distinguishes itself by close text analysis and impressive familiarity with Kant's oeuvre. Although the integration of Anthropology and lecture notes amplifies her exegesis, it simultaneously opens these to critical consideration about the validity of using them to determine Kant's considered positions (p. 124). In addition, her integrative approach, at times, obscures the tension found in many of Kant's works, such as the one between empirical and transcendental uses of imagination.

Samantha Matherne's *Seeing More: Kant's Theory of Imagination* is a contribution of major importance to the Kantian scholarship: a richly textured account of imagination's centrality across theoretical, aesthetic, and practical domains. Occasionally, her interpretations overstretch toward the unifying goal but, in doing so, open new pathways into how to explore Kant's imagination both in historical and contemporary contexts. Future work may take her reflections a few steps further, perhaps by investigating imagination's function in cross-disciplinary contexts, such as in cognitive science and aesthetics. Matherne's monograph is essential reading for scholars seeking an intensified understanding of how imagination has insinuated itself across Kant's work.

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A HISTORY OF THE MUSLIM WORLD: FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE DAWN OF MODERNITY. By Michael A. Cook. New York: Princeton University Press, 2024. 960 pp.

Michael Cook's *A History of the Muslim World* is a broad narrative of Islamic history, ranging over fourteen centuries and a geographical scope from Morocco to Mindanao. This work of historical synthesis tries to make sense of the vast and complicated history of the Muslim world for the broadest readership possible. This review critically examines Cook's main arguments, methodological decisions, and contributions to the field of historiography, as well as the implications of the work for both scholars and the general reader.

Cook's overarching argument is that Islam has been a transformative force in history, shaping societies in ways that have created discontinuities with pre-Islamic traditions. He states, "A commitment to Islam makes a difference: wherever a society and its rulers have come to be Muslim, sooner or later this has led to a major discontinuity with the society's pre-Islamic past" (p. xix). This assertion is the foundation for his exploration of state formation, cultural adaptation, and regional variations.

Cook underscores Islam's ability to build a unified cultural and political identity among heterogeneous societies. For instance, he examines the spreading of Arabic and Islamic legal concepts as contributing factors to cohesiveness in the initial caliphates (pp. 174–186). His discussion of these phenomena reveals Islam's dualistic role as both a religious and a civilizational project. Nevertheless, Cook's emphasis on discontinuity may be refined by a heightened focus on the continuities that exist with pre-Islamic traditions, including the lasting impact of Persian administrative systems.

A significant contribution made by Cook is his analysis of the ways in which Islamic states adjusted to local circumstances. He elucidates how the Abbasid Caliphate assimilated Persian bureaucratic customs and promoted cultural amalgamation (pp. 129–136). Similarly, his discussion of Ottoman administrative reforms illustrates the adaptability of Islamic governance over time (pp. 466–472).

While Cook's insights are compelling, his focus on elite institutions leaves the dynamics of non-elite actors underexplored, as he himself acknowledges, stating, "This book gives disproportionate voice to the articulate and the opinionated to the virtual exclusion of the silent, the tongue-tied, and the anonymous mass of the population" (p. xxi).

Another strength of the book is Cook's treatment of regional differences. His methodologically sound regional approach allows him to trace the different trajectories of Islamic societies. For instance, his chapters on India (pp. 521–578) and Africa (pp. 653–713) are of immense value for tracing the spread of Islam beyond the Arab heartlands. On the other hand, the uneven treatment of certain regions, such as Southeast Asia, points out the need for more balanced coverage. He describes the interaction of Islam with the local traditions across different contexts—from North African Berber revolts (pp. 196–218) to the spread of Islam in maritime Southeast Asia (pp. 624–646). The emphasis on this particular region exemplifies the dual centrifugal and centripetal forces that have significantly influenced Islamic history. As noted by Cook, "A historian of the Muslim world accordingly has to do justice to the historical reality of both the centrifugal and the centripetal pulls" (p. xxvii). Nonetheless, a more profound exploration of how these variations have impacted the wider Islamic thought and identity would enhance the book's contribution.

Cook describes his approach as "old-fashioned in a good way" (p. xxviii). He prioritizes narrative history and focuses on state formation and cultural shifts. This methodological choice reflects his commitment to making history accessible while maintaining academic rigor.

Cook's focus on elites and political frameworks represents both an advantage and a drawback. He recognizes this predisposition, stating, "The single most consistent and pervasive bias in this book is of a different kind: it gives disproportionate voice to the articulate and the opinionated" (p. xxiv). Although this concentration facilitates a coherent examination of statecraft and governance, it frequently neglects the experiences of marginalized communities, including women and non-Muslim groups.

Cook's reliance on secondary sources is candidly addressed: "For most of the ground covered in this book I am accordingly dependent on the work of historians who have grappled directly with the sources" (p. xx). While this approach enables him to synthesize a vast body of scholarship, it raises questions about the originality of his interpretations. Besides that, his selective engagement with primary sources might limit the depth of thoroughness of his analysis in some areas, primarily intellectual history, which he explicitly excludes from consideration (p. xxi). Cook's work is rich in merits, particularly with regard to its narrative clarity and wide scope. His ability to condense complex historical dynamics into a coherent framework is laudable. However, the book has several significant drawbacks. Cook's writing style is very engaging, and his narrative structure is well-organized, making it accessible to both academic readers and lay readers. A major strength of this work is its contribution to the field of Islamic historiography, presenting Islam as a force that is both unifying and diversifying, thereby providing a sophisticated viewpoint that enhances current discussions. In addition, the analysis of regional differences improves our understanding of the complex nature of the Islamic world. However, the text does have its weaknesses. Compared with Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*, the scholarship of Cook reflects a more limited thematic scope—a limitation he explicitly recognizes (p. xxi). In contrast to Hodgson's more extensive cultural and intellectual history through an interdisciplinary framework, Cook focuses predominantly on political and cultural changes, thus offering a much briefer and therefore accessible narrative that complements quite well Hodgson's significant work. However, the book is very brief in the treatment of non-Muslim communities under Islamic rule, although they played an important role in shaping the Islamic societies. Also, although Cook discusses cultural synthesis, much of his analysis is still state-driven and not well-represented grassroots cultural exchanges.

Cook's *A History of the Muslim World* is a major work in the Islamic historiography, giving a clear, comprehensive overview of the Muslim world's history. The book's concentration on the processes of state formation and cultural adaptation yields significant insights; however, its

prioritization of elite perspectives and inconsistent regional representation constrains its overall scope. For both academic audiences and the general populace, this work functions as an intriguing and intellectually stimulating primer on the historical narrative of the Muslim world. Subsequent investigations might enhance Cook's framework by integrating a broader range of viewpoints from underrepresented communities and delving deeper into the intellectual and economic histories.

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CAVELL, WILLIAMS AND THE QUESTION OF STYLE IN PHILOSOPHY. By Paolo Babbioni. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. 304 pp.

Paolo Babbioni's *Cavell, Williams and the Question of Style in Philosophy* is an academically ambitious and methodologically scholarly work that challenges the common supposition that style in philosophy is superficial. Babbioni argues that, for Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams, style is an integral part of the nature of thinking, shaping not just the form of their thinking but also the philosophical thought they put forward. In the union of close reading and digital humanities methodology, he argues forcefully for the importance of style in the philosophy field. His main argument is stated clearly at the outset: "I will be interested in other contemporary philosophers who, similarly to Wittgenstein, have tried to emphasize the importance of style in philosophy; stylistically self-conscious authors, who have used style in many ways, and have tackled different 'problems of style'" (p. ix).

The text is structured so that it increasingly develops the reader's understanding of this claim. After an introduction placing his work within the current debates over philosophical style, Babbioni conducts a comparative analysis of Cavell and Williams. He then outlines a distant reading strategy to trace the repetition of certain stylistic features in their work. The final chapter addresses the broader implications of these findings for the discipline of philosophy. "One author will be better illuminated by the background of the other, and vice versa" (p. ix), he explains, offering an explanation for his comparative analysis decision.

Babbioni's interpretation of Cavell is especially convincing. For him, Cavell's writing is marked by what he calls "lingering," a stylistic device that resists the strictures of analytic philosophy and instead invites the reader to indulge in a process of self-reflection. "Cavell discovered his own ways in philosophy, which share a common spirit—and this is a spirit that is revealed through its digressive, lingering parts" (p. 141). He puts a lot of stress on Cavell's use of parentheses, seeing them not as so-called incidental asides but an integral part of Cavell's thinking. By looking to their appearance and placement, Babbioni shows that "the massive presence of parentheses after a mark (which open to another self of the text, in counterpoint to the main body); the use, within normal parentheses and parentheses after a mark, of pronouns such as 'you' or punctuation marks such as '?'. Moreover, I also briefly observed how the lingering movement of the parenthesis is expressed by dubitative and concessive formulas such as 'perhaps' or 'though'; or by the negation ('not') of alternative ways (which are excluded but at the same time remembered in parentheses); or by the massive use of 'or', which contributes to increase the ambiguity and multiplicity of dimensions to which Cavell's writing refers (as pointed out, among others, by Mahon)." (p. 237–238) This quantitative evidence testifies to the thesis that Cavell's writing not only describes Emersonian perfectionism but actually performs it instead.

By contrast, Williams's stylistic strategy is marked by what Babbioni calls "compression," a rhetorical device for the transmission of massive meaning with laconic words. He shows how Williams,



like Nietzsche, uses brevity as a philosophical instrument: “Williams used compression for many different reasons: not only in order to free himself from an English tradition, but also to give relevance to all the other speech-acts (other than asserting and arguing) that philosophical writing can encompass” (p. 140). Such laconic words, as Babbioni contends, are at the heart of Williams’s grand critique of moral theory’s project of offering systematic accounts. “Williams used not only Nietzsche, but a style similar to Nietzsche—in its compression, incisiveness, and humor—as a tool for freeing himself from a certain English tradition” (p. 139). Babbioni’s awareness of the way Williams’s style actively resists the prevailing conventions of analytic philosophy is one of the book’s strong points.

Perhaps the most insightful part of Babbioni’s analysis is his handling of implicit argument in Williams’s writing. As opposed to more classical accounts of analysis that emphasize explicit argument, Williams’s method often involves suggestion and insinuation. Babbioni connects this feature to Williams’s reading of Nietzsche, suggesting that Williams discovered in Nietzsche’s aphoristic technique a model of philosophical address that is available to the reader to interpret. This point enriches our understanding of Williams’s resistance to the rigors of systematic moral theory.

One of the book’s methodological contributions is its application of distant reading techniques to quantify stylistic trends. Babbioni justifies the approach by asserting, “I chose a distant reading approach because it is able to measure the most evident stylistic recurrences in a certain corpus” (p. 212). Through it, he is able to show, for example, the measurable disparity between Cavell’s employment of parenthetical aside and Williams’s use of short, aphoristic remarks. While this quantitative evidence is extremely persuasive, it is occasionally at risk of obscuring more interpretative perspectives. Babbioni’s assertion that Williams’s sentences are more syntactically condensed than Cavell’s could have been enriched by a more extended consideration of the consequences of this disparity beyond mere statistical comparison.

In the last chapter, Babbioni speaks to the broader significance of his research by returning to Emerson’s reflection on individuality and philosophical legacy. He notes that both Cavell and Williams, despite having very different stylistic and philosophical inclinations, were both able to achieve an impressively individualized and non-transferrable philosophical voice. He states, “the fact remains that a new degree of culture, or style, was achieved by both philosophers” (p. 263). Babbioni shows their work as demonstrating Emersonian perfectionism—each philosopher, through his distinctive stylistic approaches, achieved a style of philosophical expression that was resistant to easy incorporation into dominant scholarly conventions. The chapter also speaks to the idea that philosophical style cannot be reduced to personal taste and is inextricably tied to the methodological and metaphilosophical concerns of an author. Babbioni concludes by suggesting that Cavell and Williams offer two models for would-be philosophers who wish to develop a style that is both personal and intellectually sound.

Although it has numerous strengths, the book is not without its weaknesses. Babbioni’s interaction with philosophers outside of Cavell and Williams is somewhat limited. Although he does gesture towards Nietzsche’s impact on Williams, a more in-depth discussion of other philosophers who are noted for their attention to style—such as Derrida or Rorty—would have made his argument more robust. Furthermore, although the quantitative methodology is novel, there are instances where a more in-depth philosophical examination of the implications of these stylistic changes, rather than the statistical occurrence, would be more desirable. Nonetheless, *Cavell, Williams and the Question of Style in Philosophy* is a significant contribution to the philosophy of philosophical writing. In showing that style is not an appendage but an element of philosophical inquiry, Babbioni turns the usual view that philosophy is first and foremost a matter of argumentation over expression on its head. His book will be required reading for Cavell and Williams scholars, philosophers of language, and literary philosophers. Moreover, it poses questions about the future of style in philosophy more generally. If Babbioni’s approach succeeds here, it can be applied to other thinkers as well, enabling us to better grasp how style determines philosophical thought more generally across traditions.

By drawing out the profound bond that underlies the relationship between writing and thought, Babbotti has created a work that is both rigorously methodical and stimulating. His book increases our appreciation of Cavell and Williams, yet simultaneously provokes a re-consideration of the place of style within philosophy as a whole.

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Style is subjective, relational to the context in which it is understood *and* applied. Style is a mark of the identity of an individual *in a particular space and time*, with specific activity (or set of actions and attributes) associated with the individual. In this engaging, sometimes convoluted, yet relentlessly deep exploration of two philosophers and their style, Paolo Babbotti is absolutely stunning in revealing the fundamental questions that trouble any literary or philosophical student regarding style. The web of his analysis offers a mesh that interconnects and intersects factors like appropriateness, personal touch, the plausible quotient of perfectionism.

In *Cavell, Williams and the Question of Style in Philosophy*, Babbotti observes the phenomenon of style in line with the personalities of two philosophers of the twentieth century, whom he calls the “perfectionist friends” – American philosopher Stanley Cavell (1926–2018) and the English philosopher Bernard Williams (1929–2003). Babbotti starts off with a detailed execution of setting the ground straight for how style is studied and understood in the context of becoming an identity-marker for some and the attribute weaved into personalities with time and experience. Throughout the book, Babbotti manages to weave between literature, commonplace problems, and issues as well as strictly academic and scholarly discourses, debates, and exchanges on philosophical questions. Morality remains a thread that he associates with the fundamental point of initiation of scholarly pursuits in theorizing style, and the point of contention that brings forth relevant and recurrent philosophical debates.

In this philosophical exploration, both by an academician (with a systematic methodology in place) and by a thinker (revealed through his constant and conscious deliberation through his discourse with the texts of these philosophers and the readers), Babbotti serves a platter of intricate knowledge on style. The ‘Introduction’ serves as a groundwork of establishing the way philosophical emphasis on getting things right and being morally perfect, following the Emersonian tradition, made philosopher-stylists like Cavell and Williams pursue paths of active experimentation and openness in their “playing fields” of choices in writing. In Chapter 1, “Emersonian Perfectionist Writing in Philosophy”, Babbotti analyzes Emersonian criteria for perfectionist writing in the earliest works of Cavell and Williams as young philosophers, *The Claim of Reason* (1979) and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) respectively. In the chapters that follow, “Through the Examples” and “Stylistic Methods”, Babbotti analyzes excerpts of Cavell’s critique against the emotivist theory to establish that Cavell had an intimate style of writing. Furthermore, through an analysis of Williams’s critique of J.J.C. Smart’s utilitarian minimalization of a human being in moral crisis through open-ended discussions of problems faced by common people, Babbotti establishes that Williams always believed in finding answers that were in spaces beyond the strict confines of philosophy. Babbotti, in the next chapter “Stylistic Methods” establishes that Cavell and Williams were metaphilosophically similar, but differed in how they ‘opened’ the space for readers to build meanings and answers to the questions posed in their writing. While doing so, in many of the chapters, Babbotti’s own analysis of stylistic concerns of knowledge, wisdom and aphorism in writing through detailed analysis of Bertolt Brecht’s “son” (literary creation, as Babbotti contends) Mr. K and Nietzsche’s *Human All Too Human* (which Williams admired and contended was a classic example of the dry aphoristic style

prerogative of the German nihilist) stands out. The rigorous exercise of Babbotti reaches a pinnacle when he utilizes Cavell's and Williams's respective analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* and Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, to show that they ultimately embodied the very characters that they studied in their practices and principles of writing as matured philosophers in their later stages of life. For Babbotti, Cavell is the playful, adventurous and "outsider" Auguste Dupin in philosophy who was the intimate and human voice in a strict and objective school of philosophy. On the other hand, Babbotti analyzes Williams's handling of Marxist and conservative critiques in Oxford and Cambridge styled-philosophical circles to prove that as a true "maverick" of the discipline, Williams establishes a dialectical style of writing and rebutting criticisms against approaches in a deeply logical and witty manner (one is reminded of the aphorism of Nietzsche that he so admires). He ends the long exploration with a unique quantitative study that just put to empirical language many of his observations and contentions in the book prior to that chapter.

Babbotti's personal attempts at fulfilling many of the Emersonian perfectionist writing criteria in the process of tracing them in the philosophical styles of Cavell and Williams is praiseworthy because of several reasons. First, Babbotti digresses in many spaces from his original plan (that he meticulously lays out before sections or chapters begin). Many times, as a reader with a literary background trying to understand the complex workings of an academic-thinker in philosophy, one does feel lost and has to backtrack. His analysis in turn helps one expand on his or her own understanding of 'style' as a human phenomenon in the process. Secondly, Babbotti effectively blurs the boundaries of and merges literary discourses with philosophical exposition. However, it blends and contextualizes even a lay reader into the stylistic worlds of Cavell and Williams. Thirdly, Babbotti's beautiful use of allegory to portray the unique positions of 'outsider' and 'maverick' for two of the most renowned analytical philosophers as against their contemporaries, further emphasizes that philosophy is relational and perfectly unfinished. Thus, in *Cavell, Williams and the Question of Style in Philosophy*, one does get a first-hand experience in 'living' style as an innate ability that gets worked and re-worked on by human interactions and deliberations. As personalities evolve, so do their styles. So, there can never be an absolutist explanation of style.

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MODERNITY, PRINT AND SAHITYA: THE MAKING OF A NEW LITERARY CULTURE, 1866–1919. By Sumanyu Satpathy. London: Routledge, 2024. 238 pp.

Where Walter Benjamin might view print as a tool of "mechanical reproduction" that withers the "aura", Benedict Anderson argues print capitalism catalyzes the rise of linguistic-national consciousness. Sumanyu Satpathy's *Modernity, Print and Sahitya: The Making of a New Literary Culture, 1866–1919*, engages with these theoretical tensions and places Odia literature as both a casualty and a beneficiary of the print revolution, carrying the contradictions of literary modernity.

It must be appreciated that the book does not follow a strict chronology, but rather delves into layered insights ranging from linguistic debates to the evolution of Odia *sahitya* as a modern genre. The book's structure is designed thoughtfully with five thematic chapters which stand on their own while contributing to the larger story of the development of modern Odia *sahitya*. These chapters reveal a new dimension of Odia literary culture's evolution through interactions with print, education, and colonial power. This structure does more than just presenting information; it tells a story of transformation in which debates about grammar, schoolbooks, and newspapers are as important as literary texts themselves.

Odia modernity, to Satpathy, is not derivative, but reconfigured by local struggles for linguistic recognition and the sociopolitical anxieties of a late-colonial regional elite. To understand this, the author has offered a distinct model where authors like Fakir Mohan Senapati, who dealt with agrarian distress, caste discrimination and misuse of law, employed interesting literary strategies. His irony and narrative playfulness create what Satpathy calls a “proto-modernist realism”, one that constantly reveals the contradictions of its own discourse. Unlike the more established and institutionally supported Bengali and Hindi literary cultures, Senapati’s writings emerge from a deep negotiation with the rising print culture in Odisha. The book attempts to reconstruct the socio-literary world of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Odisha when Odia emerged as a modern literary language sourced from periodicals, schoolbooks, literary essays, and other archival records. Satpathy carefully traces how Odia intellectuals, writing in periodicals such as *Utkal Dipika* and *Utkal Darpan* utilized print not only to assert Odia linguistic autonomy but also to resist the cultural dominance of Bengali, which had enjoyed a head start in the colonial print economy. This is where the book resonates with Benedict Anderson’s notion that print capitalism enabled the masses to imagine themselves as part of a cohesive national and cultural unit, outlined in his *Imagined Communities*. Satpathy’s use of Anderson’s theory of collective consciousness equips the reader to observe Odisha’s case diligently, where the standardization of Odia through print accelerated the Odia’s rise as a literary language. This phenomenon was both a political act and a cultural reawakening.

Furthermore, the book decodes a compelling story of resistance, adaptation, and the making of a modern regional identity combining intellectual clarity and historical nuance. For scholars working at the intersection of postcolonial studies, comparative literature, and print culture, this work offers a rich archive and a significant methodological intervention. Although Raymond Williams is not cited directly, his conceptual influence is palpable, especially in discussion around evolving lexicons. For instance, keywords like *adhunik* (modern) and *sahitya* (literature) changed their meanings under the pressures of colonial educational and bureaucratic systems. These are not simply translations of “modern” and “literature”, but terms with histories, tensions, and aspirations of their own. The ideological and aesthetic shift of understanding *sahitya* as a standardized, codified genre, *adhunik* as a phenomenon that represents modern age and *adhunikata* as a “new kind of newness” is noteworthy. This transition was not simply literary, it marked a shift in what may be counted as a cultural autonomy over terms. The author also engages with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “provincializing” of Europe and his concept of the “Muddle of Modernity”, particularly in showing how terms like *adhunik* (modern) and *sahitya* (literature) were refracted through both colonial discourse and indigenous reinterpretation (Chakrabarty 14). The book’s philological attention to such terms gives it a depth that few postcolonial studies of print culture achieve. Odia was once declared unfit for serious literature, a claim, Odia writers actively resisted through the very medium of print. In this context, Chakrabarty’s “Muddle of Modernity” becomes a useful lens, because modernity in Odisha was not just about catching up with the West but also about rethinking tradition in new formats. Satpathy illustrates this through the example of *Bhagabat Tungi*, a traditional space for collective reading of sacred texts. It is considered a pre-modern forum that arguably evolved into proto-public spheres and eventually transformed into modern literary spaces. He reconstructs indigenous modes of collectivity within temple courtyards, marketplaces, community reading halls (*chatshalis*) as sites of dialogic engagement, rejecting a purely Eurocentric model of the Habermasian public sphere. These public spaces can be seen as precursors to modernity. Thus, the arrival of print in Odisha did not simply replace oral cultures but restructured them, allowing for a new public language of criticism, debate, and identity-making.

These theoretical undercurrents are strong but not overwhelming. As readers, we can notice how the author has weaved ideas from Anderson, Bernard Cohn, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Raymond Williams into his arguments without letting theory obscure the material. It is a herculean task to place Indian languages especially the less-discussed ones like Odia, within global theoretical debates. Satpathy shows that it can be done, and done with sensitivity. He does not just apply Western theory;

he localizes it, questions it, and even adds to it. He complements Francesca Orsini and Sheldon Pollock by contributing to the larger project of vernacular literary history in South Asia. But he challenges them by valuing non-canonical forms of writing and centering arguments on the intra-vernacular conflicts. Thus, Satpathy has provided a template for how vernacular literary histories can write back to larger paradigms in global theory.

Unlike other works, *Modernity, Print and Sahitya* represents a critical departure from Eurocentric or metropole-focused literary histories. It draws attention to the asymmetries and inter-lingual rivalries within Indian language traditions themselves, especially the tension between Bengali and Odia. In doing so, Satpathy complicates the field's habitual binaries (East or West, colonizer or colonized) by highlighting the inter-regional politics of literary canon formation. The book insists that comparative literature must take seriously the dynamics of the so-called "minor" languages and examine how they negotiate both the pressures of dominant regional languages and the broader forces of global modernity. His exploration of how Odia intellectuals mobilized print technology to assert their cultural autonomy not only contributes to our understanding of a polyphonic literary modernity in South Asia but also calls for a rethinking of what constitutes the "comparative" in comparative literature. The interplay of translation, adaptation, and terminological transformation serves not only as a formal strategy but also as a politically charged process. Like Williams, Satpathy understands literature not as an autonomous aesthetic domain but as a material practice which is deeply embedded in institutions like schools, presses, periodicals and beyond. His study is both particular in its focus, meticulously grounded in the literary and material history of Odia print and expansive in its implications for how we theorize language, literature, and modernity.

In outline, Satpathy's writing is clear and accessible without being simplistic. His logically built arguments and his apt examples from textbooks, grammar primers, or essays not only speak to seasoned scholars but also welcome new readers into the conversation who want to navigate such theoretical texts. Though the book offers an incisive reading of colonial structures, class and culture, the conversation around the gendered nature of print culture and elitist tendencies of public spaces in colonial Odisha remains comparatively limited, suggesting avenues for future research.

The book concludes by reminding readers that modernity is far from being a linear progression and is best understood through complexities. *Modernity, Print and Sahitya* is more than a regional literary history. Its interdisciplinary approach to the theories of print capitalism, the public sphere, and language politics provides a nuanced account of how a new literary culture was marked by both continuity and rupture. Satpathy challenges universal models of literary modernity by focusing on the philological and linguistic dynamics of the Odia language. The book is a profound reflection on how print reshaped modernity, public life, and linguistic identity in colonial Odisha. It encourages us to consider the historiography of vernacular languages as rich, autonomous narratives that challenge our assumptions about what it means to be modern, literary, and Indian. At the end, the question that remains urgent and open-ended: If the printing-press enabled regional languages to enter modernity, will digital platform amplify their voices or absorb them into a new kind of homogenizing globalism?

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APPRECIATION POST: TOWARDS AN ART HISTORY OF INSTAGRAM. By Tara Ward. Oakland: University of California Press, 2024. 322 pp.

Instagram, to say the least, has democratised the phenomenon of creating and sharing images. Instead of dismissing it as just another social media nonsense/discourse, this phenomenon deserves



to be anchored within the concerns of art history. Indeed, several scholars have turned to Instagram in the process of pursuing gender studies, popular culture or visual culture. However, Tara Ward's *Appreciation Post: Towards an Art History of Instagram* is likely to be the first book-length study of the platform that speaks to its images from the perspectives of making, disseminating, and interpreting images, along with engaging with them while also witnessing how wider audiences engage with them. Ward does not claim to provide a definite art history of Instagram; she does not call all of Instagram as art; neither does she make a general argument about the varied and often conflicting trajectories of image making and reception on Instagram. Her contribution is towards identifying the unique characteristics of the platform as especially visible in certain accounts and images and the phenomena of engagement with these accounts as these intersect with the concerns of art history as a discipline. The points of intersection she chooses to focus on are: the practices of dealing with a deluge of images, the notions of beauty and attractiveness, and the phenomena of art collection, and the-artist-as-genius.

Instagram, the largely photography-based app, was launched in 2010. It is a platform that allows users to share images. In this sense, it “decenters the archival function” (30) in that it allows one to see pictures posted by other people. Ward further elaborates on the specificity of Instagram while also explaining her approach:

The claim of this text is that Instagram is best understood as a structure of the visual. It is something that organizes and supports what I pointedly call “visual” rather than “vision.” The former is a broader category that includes not just the process of looking, but what can be seen and by whom, as well as the means by which things are brought into view and left out of it. Yet studying Instagram does not reveal the eternal nature of optics. Instead, with a nod to Michel Foucault, it functions as a diagram of some parts of contemporary ocularity. Instagram not only defines who or what can be seen, but also how those things are understood (knowledge) and their relative value (power). (13)

Understanding this viscosity, as Ward expresses it, brings many insights that add further nuance to concerns of art history.

For instance, regarding her first point (dealing with a deluge of images, as mentioned above), Ward argues that while Instagram has been touted as one of the examples of attention economy, it actually relies on inattentiveness. Thus, it is not a space to discuss the gaze, with all of its focus on a sustained engagement. Rather, it encourages the “glance” which barely allows users to focus on an image as they keep scrolling to see the next image rather than spend time on the image in front of them. Similarly, Instagram thrives on similar kinds of imagery rather than encouraging innovation.

The second theme of the book – notions of beauty and attractiveness on Instagram – demonstrates that ideas and vocabulary around image-making, previously known only to specialists, artists, and art historians (such as the rule of thirds or pose and angle) are now known to wider audiences thanks to the “democratization of expertise.” This democratization is not unqualified though: it comes with restrictions on who can be represented. What is deemed attractive conforms to young, White, straight, cis, bourgeois femininity.

The third theme of the practices of collection of art focuses on a sort of didactic culture around things such as sneakers. The practice of imparting information about the shoes, their pricing, or their fashionability and taste inspires an aesthetics which is evocative of canonicity, as espoused by Harold Bloom, for instance. Related is the theme of the-artist-as-genius as an active audience (a fan following, that is) determines or defines the idea of the artist. Using the example of a Black fashion designer and entrepreneur who appropriates canon of Western art to brand and promote his apparel design, Ward introduces readers to the ways in which art finds a cause and an audience on Instagram.

Together, the three themes leave readers well informed about turning to popular culture in ways that enrich conventional agendas of various disciplines. Ward summarises:

The trajectory of the book moves from viewing, to posting, to achieving Instagram fame, which is the platform's own mythology for how it will be integrated into users' lives. The method involves carefully

looking, considering the construction in both physical and social terms, then placing the work and artist into larger, historical frameworks. By charting a path through these parallel progressions, *Appreciation Post* calls attention to the way we narrate visual phenomena and the impact that process and context have on those stories. (17)

One would find it difficult to unsee Instagram after reading Ward's book. Her observations about the way images are made and consumed are a provocation to examine one's own news feed, while also nudging one to explore other ways of making sense of it. Her style of writing is simple yet rich, unburdened with jargon: "Looking is no longer one-to-one, but a process of incorporating the many" (31).

*Appreciation Post* is a phenomenology of Instagram that is located in cultural and historical frameworks, and should ideally be followed by studies attempting a similar kind of phenomenology for several other concerns surrounding image-making on Instagram: its deployment by art- and heritage-related accounts, marketing or commercial rhetoric, wellness and fitness discourse and so on.

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THE BROADVIEW INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY. By Andrew Bailey (Ed.). Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2024. 1056 pp.

Textbooks or introductory course books for students pursuing humanities must walk the tough rope of providing an overview of a domain while also making them familiar with the specificities of the range of models and perspectives that exist among the scholars working in the field. Andrew Bailey's edited volume titled *The Broadview Introduction to Philosophy* easily fulfils these criteria not just in terms of introducing the students to the content of the discipline but also in terms of helping course instructors to frame their own teaching and introductory courses in helpful ways such as generating meta reflections on why and which texts ought one choose for one's course (as opposed to merely prescribing them for reading after which the students are expected to be on their own!). While there is no explicit section on aesthetics and literature that might directly address the interests of the readers and subject matter of this journal, the volume has plenty that students of aesthetics and literature read or borrow from in order to engage with their texts at deeper levels.

Bailey introduces philosophy in terms of premises, key questions, arguments, and methods used within philosophy. While his emphasis on fallacies and bad arguments caution one to approach thought and argumentation with serious care, his definition of philosophy as love for wisdom refreshes one's memory about why one turns to the discipline to answer questions about the world and how to live in the world. Further, every section and chapters within the sections in the book – philosophy of religion, knowledge, metaphysics, ethics, social-political philosophy, and life, death and happiness – have a detailed introduction providing background to the philosophers and their larger projects while contextualising the reading at hand.

The essays that will be of greater relevance to the students of aesthetics and literature include Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Jean Paul Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and Thomas Nagel's *What Does It Like to Be a Bat?* These excerpts or essays bring strong foundations to analyses and critiques of texts. While existentialism, Marxism, and feminism are established literary (and cultural and critical) theories, Nagel's essay is a recommended reading in object oriented ontology that so strongly resonates with thing theory and other philosophical positions invoked in posthumanism and art. These,

along with other units, help a discerning reader identify questions and different positions from which these are responded to not just in philosophy but also in daily “practical” life.

Like Immanuel Kant’s vision or view of human enlightenment as that which ushers human race into maturity (the state in which one thinks for oneself rather than depend on others for opinions or views), introduction volumes such as Bailey’s are tools that one must keep revisiting. These are compasses to the classics that students and scholars will always need to keep coming back to the first principles. One can never have enough of these.

SONI WADHWA

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LITERARY JOURNEYS: MAPPING FICTIONAL TRAVELS ACROSS THE WORLD OF LITERATURE. By John McMurtrie (Ed.). Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2024. 256 pp.

World literature is of interest to scholars as an area concerned with translation, power, comparative aesthetics, and so on. However, it also finds great enthusiasm outside academia as manifested in curiosity around great and interesting books from authors and cultures far and wide. It is not very often that books appealing to both the scholarly and the non-academic groups emerge to celebrate diversity in world literatures. John McMurtrie’s edited volume is one of such rare books. It has short, informative essays on works of fiction in which a journey is explicitly mentioned and undertaken by character(s) not just in the sense of spatial journeys (into “real” rather than imaginary places) but also in the sense of spiritual ones.

The individual essays are contributed by authors, scholars, poets, curators, critics, and so on. To quote from the editor:

This volume’s discriminating selection was driven by three main criteria: firstly, the work had to be a literary work of fiction, so explicitly nonfiction travel writing was excluded; second, each book should contain a journey that is evidentially based on real, rather than imaginary, locations even if those places are not explicitly mentioned. For this reason, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is included whereas Dante’s *Inferno* is not. Third, the aim was for the book to act both as a travel companion to different corners of the globe, and additionally as a time machine with the entries running chronologically. (10)

Beginning with Homer’s *The Odyssey* (8th century BCE) and concluding with Amor Twoles’s *The Lincoln Highway* (2021), the book profiles seventy eight travel books organised under four headings: Quests & Explorations (upto 1897), The Age of Travel (1898–1953), Postmodern Movements (1954–1999), and Contemporary Crossings (2000–present). The essays are richly complemented by illustrations drawn from paintings and other forms of visual culture for their depictions of the authors’ conceptions of spaces and journeys.

The book also closely ties with the idea of travel in the world and travel within a book through the act of reading. At one level, *Literary Journeys* is a ready reference for works on the theme containing basic facts about the text, the author, the time it was written in, and adaptations wherever available. At another level, it is a treasure for bibliophiles who love the form of the book as much as the thought of the book as an idea.

Readers and travellers will want to look up the book to see if their own favourite works of travel, journey, or adventure have made it to this curation. Some will inevitably be saddened to see that not many works from the Global South can be found in it. For instance, Bengali author Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay’s *Chander Pahar* [The Mountain of the Moon] (1937), a novel about a young man’s

adventures in the forests of Africa is not in the list. However, that should not necessarily be seen as a limitation of McMurtrie's imagination or resourcefulness because this book deserves to be built upon with more books: the point of a curation is to highlight its subjectivity and also to inspire more attempts at curation.

One must read *Literary Journeys* for all kinds of reasons, innocent and wise. One of these is to spot the most interesting journey. Another is to broaden one's understanding of quests and cultural investments into meanings of quests and journeys. For instance, 17th century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho's journey into northern provinces of the region covers a whopping 1500 miles in 156 days and is an example of all kinds of hardships. On the other hand, the more well-known *Robinson Crusoe*'s journey is a journey into spiritual and moral identity in which the impulse to travel is referred to as the original sin. In the process of reading, fine details emerge about journeys in texts, especially around the texts that one has read. For instance, *Robinson Crusoe* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* don't necessarily come to mind as texts of journey but they are. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is known as a work of Romantic poetry but it is also about growth, beauty, and personhood.

Thus, a third reason to read *Literary Journeys* is to discover new texts or refresh one's memory of the texts already read. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (1851) has the eponymous character hyphenated in the title but not in the book! And that its first edition didn't have the epilogue. Its title was, simply, *The Whale*. Another example is Defoe's novel. As mentioned earlier, *Robinson Crusoe* comes to mind as the story of a character living alone on an island but that part is preceded and followed by journeys to and from the island. Similarly, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is another:

A reader new to the text may be surprised that significant journeys are the heart of the story. Characters, compelled by the need to escape slavery or in an effort to find a new life away from it, sojourn to Canada, to Louisiana, and eventually "back to Africa," reminding us that American slavery involved global travel, whether forced or voluntary. (66)

But most importantly, one must read it to germinate more archives of world literature organised on the lines of themes or form: Bildungsroman, women's journeys, children's journeys from innocence to experience, South-South journeys, journeys from South to North, or even memoirs and non-fiction (as left out in this book).

*Literary Journeys* is a journey into journeys. It can be read in any order and from any point. This (reading) is not going to be a linear one and will hardly be a continuous one from cover to cover. It is a book that needs to be read in order to be dazzled by trivia around books.

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#### COLONIALISM, WORLD LITERATURE AND THE MODERN CULTURE OF LETTERS.

By Baidik Bhattacharya, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 302 pp.

Reading literature helps individuals gain a deeper understanding of their own experiences and how these are shaped by history and the current context. Engaging with and interpreting literature provides insights into how societies and cultures challenge common beliefs, while also fostering creativity and imagination. In this book, the author argues that literature as a distinct mode of language, does not exclusively belong to any single culture or historical context. Rather, it encompasses a variety of ideas and practices from diverse cultural realms, shaping its identity through the legacies of violent colonial encounters in the eighteenth century. The remnants of these

multicultural, multilingual, and intermedial histories—formed through colonial governance and imperial networks, as suggested by Jones—remain evident in the evolution and significance of the new concept. The author seeks to elucidate these remnants and minor narratives through the theoretical framework of the ‘literary sovereign.’ Anyone interested in tracing the genealogy of literature will greatly benefit from this book.

The book is divided into two parts, each containing three chapters. The chapters are followed by a comprehensive introduction detailing the formation of the ‘literary sovereign,’ covering its full range across continents from Jones’ “singular species” of poetry and Hastings’ “latitude of criticism” to Goethe’s “world literature” and Schlegel’s “literary history” that eventually reached its climax in Arnold’s invocation of “culture” on a global scale. The language used is fluid, and the writing is simple to understand. The book essentially questions the genealogy of literature, but it does so within the ‘longue durée’ of colonial histories. The author introduces the term ‘literary sovereignty,’ which marked a form of textuality that was radically opposite from contemporary standards of Europe—especially in terms of mimetic imitation or repetition in its enclosed performativity and specific to the Orient in its cultural details. Once a language disassociates itself from mimesis and is reimagined as a political instrument inside a bonded space like a colony, it becomes possible for the colonial government to deploy this form of textuality to wider fields and purposes. The author argues that one of the ways Europe made sense of ‘literary sovereign’ was through the conceptual expansion of world literature. In this period of postcolonialism, a period of tenuous philosophical tenets and dubious claims of universality, the ‘literary sovereign’ offered a unique way to make sense of history that was larger than anything that Europe ever had previously grappled with.

The ‘literary sovereign’ as presented in this book is not a new writing style or formal innovation, but a critical framework that emerged during British colonial rule in India and Europe’s engagement with texts in Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. It was not a call for new writing, but a concept rooted in ancient texts from these languages, never intended as a writing manifesto.

Part I of this book examines colonial archives to track the development of a new language that gradually influenced political institutions and practices. Chapter 1 looks at how colonial officials worked with local scholars to create what the author calls “ethnographic recension,” a method that tied an ethnographic world to legal and literary texts. This collaboration between earlier humanists like Erasmus and later scholars like Lachmann introduced a new model of textual authority, blending philology and ethnology, marking the beginning of colonialism. In the colonial world, the literary sovereign’s authority was shaped through translation. However, as shown in Chapter 2, it wasn’t the clarity of translation but the presence of the “untranslatable” that ensured textual integrity. These untranslatable elements, like local cultural details or unique religious practices, were key to maintaining authenticity. The author argues that across works like Charles Wilkins’s *Bhagavad Gita* (1785) and William Jones’s *Al Shirājiyyah* (1792), the untranslatable became a political tool—central to ‘literary sovereignty.’ This was highlighted in the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, where the “untranslatable” Indian culture became a focal point of dispute, ultimately influencing colonial governance. In Chapter 3, the author explores colonial archives to uncover two types of comparison: one based on the current moment (diachronic) and the other based on history (synchronic).

Due to the global and multilingual nature of modern empires, the idea of the ‘literary sovereign’ spread to Europe, influencing its literary salons, circles, and critical discussions. Part II of this book examines its impact in Europe, focusing on three areas: German philosophy, French novels, and English literary history. Chapter 4 traces the development of the concept of World literature, showing how it helped Europe understand and deal with the colonial history of the literary sovereign. Though often linked to Goethe, its roots are found in Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). The author argues that World literature is a culmination of Kant’s ideas, which suggest that judgments of taste, though universal in claim, are not based on any fixed or universal principles. These judgments depend on communal consensus and



anthropological perspectives, establishing a model of comparative judgment inspired by Kant's framework. Chapter 5 examines how the nineteenth-century French novel—especially highlighting the works of Balzac and Flaubert, reflects a new aesthetic shaped by colonial history. Drawing on Jacques Ranciere's ideas, the author contends that this literary transformation was not confined to France but was embedded within a broader global context. Challenging the conventional Eurocentric view of literary history, the book illustrates how colonial texts, translations, and depictions of the Orient influenced literary practices. The author suggests that the nineteenth-century French novels represent a World literature, shaped by a multilingual and multicultural logic, driven by the concept of 'literary sovereign.'

Chapter 6 explores the gradual development of English literary history, focusing on how literature transitioned from an autonomous and performative entity to an expression of national identity. Some of these ideas were first expressed as part of the 'literary sovereign' paradigm and were reinforced as they traveled across geographical and intellectual landscapes.

The author's previous book, *Postcolonial Writing in the Era of World Literature: Texts, Territories, Globalizations*, examines surrounding postcolonial studies and world literature, arguing that world literature as an analytical framework is no longer relevant. In this context, when read, this book appears to serve as a prequel to it, laying the groundwork for further discussions and reflections.

The book's engagement with cross-cultural and interdisciplinary issues clashes as well as intersects to shape contemporary literary discourse. It is an essential read for those interested in the entangled worlds of texts and territories, philological inquiries, and the intersections of literary and political power. Furthermore, the book provides valuable tools for decolonizing literary studies by tracing the genealogies of world literature and comparative literature—both deeply rooted in European colonialism.

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INDIAN DIASPORA LITERATURE: A CRITICAL EVALUATION. By Dipak Giri (Ed.). New Delhi: Malik & Sons Publishers & Distributors, 2024. 215 pp.

Dipak Giri's edited book *Indian Diaspora Literature: A Critical Evaluation* is an invaluable addition to Indian Diaspora studies. The most striking quality of this book is that it lays bare the intricacies of the Indian diaspora experience in simple and lucid language. In addition to giving readers a clearer understanding of the rich and varied contributions made by Indian diaspora writers, the book also offers a thorough and perceptive review. The varied experiences of the Indian diaspora are examined in this book using literary and cultural studies. It looks at the difficulties of living in two different worlds, identity formation, and cultural displacement faced by Indian immigrants. The book consists of twenty chapters written by scholars from different states of India. The scholars have contributed to the book, offering a wide range of perspectives on literature from the Indian diaspora. Well-known authors Kiran Desai, V.S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are among those whose works are examined, and their contributions to the topic are insightfully analyzed. A comprehensive understanding of the diaspora experience is provided by the collection, which blends literary analysis with social analyses, historical perspectives, and film studies. The effects of migration on individuals and communities, multiculturalism, interculturalism, and diasporic identity are among the significant subjects covered in the book. In order to show the breadth and complexity of Indian Diaspora writing, it examines a variety of literary forms, such as novels, short stories, poems, and movies.

The book deals with the various forms of migration, including forced displacement (like the indentured labour system) and voluntary migration in search of better opportunities. It analyzes the emotional and psychological impact of leaving one's homeland, including feelings of exile, alienation, and nostalgia. The anthology explores how diasporic individuals negotiate their identities, grappling with the challenges of maintaining their cultural heritage while adapting to new environments. It examines themes of multiculturalism, interculturalism, and the complexities of forming transnational identities.

The book examines how Indian diaspora experiences are reflected in various forms of art, including literature (novels, short stories, and poetry), film, and even folklore. It analyzes how these artistic expressions capture the nuances of diasporic life, from the joys of cultural exchange to the struggles of maintaining cultural traditions. The incisive and thorough collection of academic studies *Indian Diaspora Literature: A Critical Evaluation* explores the various themes, storylines, and experiences found in Indian diaspora literature. Numerous subject-matter specialists put together the anthology, which offers a thorough examination of the ways in which well-known writers from the Indian diaspora portray migration, cultural displacement, and identity problems. A distinct viewpoint on how literature captures the complex lives of immigrants, the subtleties of transcultural identities, and the difficulties of belonging to several worlds is provided by each essay.

D. Amalraj's essay on *One Amazing Thing* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni examines how diverse immigrants, despite their differences, find solace and resilience in each other during moments of adversity, and they find unexplored things "brighter" than what they have. She appeals that everyone should be heard, but that those who are lucky enough to find trustworthy friends are lucky is what makes her work so exceptional. In this context Amalraj's reference from *The Bible* is here quotable, "One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (9-10)" This is relevant to family devotional study. For example, "Only when one is in adversity, one can find in a man whether he is really a friend in need or a hypocrite or a betrayer. (10)" Priyanka Singla's analysis of Githa Hariharan's short stories unveils the multi-dimensional layers of diaspora experience, and it showcases how these works reflect the emotional and psychological journeys of the displaced. The book also discusses the writings of other well-known authors, such as Shauna Singh Baldwin, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Rohinton Mistry (with a humanistic and realistic approach), whose stories explore themes of homelessness, alienation, and displacement. The struggles of the characters faced by them in the contemporary world with special reference to Parsi historical identity issues have been examined at length. Sapna Dogra's study on Baldwin's *English Lessons and Other Stories* highlights the diasporic battle with cultural and emotional dislocation, while Dr. Mahalakshmi's assessment of Lahiri's *The Namesake* masterfully examines the difficulties of transcultural identification. The most striking line, according to me, in Chapter 4 is, "Adaptation to a new environment is a complex process that has been studied in both literature and psychology. (33)"

The book broadens its focus beyond literature to examine diaspora perspectives through visual media. An interesting examination of how diaspora is portrayed in a few Indian films is provided by Himakshi Kalita's research on Indian diaspora themes in cinema, which highlights the power of film to bridge cultural divides and influence how people view migration. In addition, Shantilal Ghegade's study on diaspora literature and cinema emphasizes the variety of narrative strategies used by writers and filmmakers to depict the experience of immigrants. Ashish Kumar's chapter beautifully deals with migration and separation through folksongs. With the help of Bhikari Thakur's musical play *Bidesia*, the chapter throws light on the plight of migrants. The central idea present in it is, "Folklore is one of the prominent mediums to express the deep human sentiments, essential aspects of life, social codes, and lived realities of human beings through the orature of a particular society. (51)" As Kalyan Sonawane explores the critical role that media plays in influencing how Indian diaspora literature is understood, the collection also dives into the relationship between media and literature. By means of these analyses, the book demonstrates how the Indian diaspora is a worldwide narrative

that cuts over boundaries, media, and generations, rather than merely being a literary phenomenon. The essays that concentrate on cultural and personal narratives, like those by Sahadev Roy on Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* and Aisha Haleem on *Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart*, offer a moving analysis of the emotional costs of migration as well as the conflicts between assimilation and cultural preservation. It deals with a provocative examination of the Indian indenture experience via Totaram Sanadhya's writings, and Agha Shahid Ali, who called himself "triple exiled," deals with the modern portrayal of Kashmir. With an emphasis on the suffering of exile and the yearning for a lost homeland, these articles highlight the emotional and historical burden that exiled communities bear. The book ends with Giri's chapter on Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, which deals with challenges and problems faced by immigrants with the help of the characters like Biju, Sayeed, Gyan, Harish, Harry, Sai, etc., the chapter highlights the importance of memory; all characters are "shuttling between past and present. (181)" Displacement and alienation are suffered by everyone.

In short, Dipak Giri's *Indian Diaspora Literature: A Critical Evaluation* is an invaluable resource to the study of Indian diaspora. A good understanding of the rich and varied contributions of Indian diaspora writers is brilliantly provided. The book offers a thorough and perceptive examination and analysis of Indian diaspora literature, providing important insights into the nuances of identity, migration, and cross-cultural interaction in a globalized society. Essentially, anyone interested in exploring the themes of migration, identity, displacement, and the human condition as portrayed in South Asian literature will find these topics valuable.

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## JOURNALS RECEIVED

*British Journal of Aesthetics, Comparative Literature, New Literary History,  
Poetics Today, Philosophy and Literature, Critical Inquiry, Journal of  
Modern Literature, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

The *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* (ISSN: 0252-8169) is a quarterly peer-reviewed academic journal published by Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics, India, since 1977. The Institute was founded by Prof. Ananta Charan Sukla (1942–2020) on 22 August 1977, coinciding with the birth centenary of renowned philosopher, aesthetician, and historian of Indian art Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) to promote interdisciplinary studies and research in comparative literature, literary theory and criticism, aesthetics, philosophy, art history, criticism of the arts, and history of ideas. (Vishvanatha Kaviraja, most widely known for his masterpiece in aesthetics, *Sahityadarpana*, or the “Mirror of Composition,” was a prolific 14th-century Indian poet, scholar, aesthetician, and rhetorician.)

The Journal publishes essays and book reviews ranging across the literary and philosophical traditions of the East and the West, addressing interdisciplinary and cross-cultural issues in literary understanding and interpretation, aesthetic theories, conceptual analysis of art, literature, philosophy, religion, mythology, history of ideas, literary theory, history, and criticism. It also publishes special issues of current critical interest and contemporary relevance.

The Journal has published the finest of essays by authors of global renown like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, John Hospers, John Fisher, Murray Krieger, Martin Bocco, Remo Ceserani, J.B. Vickery, Menachem Brinker, Milton Snoeyenbos, Mary Wiseman, Ronald Roblin, T.R. Martland, S.C. Sengupta, K.R.S. Iyengar, Charles Altieri, Martin Jay, Jonathan Culler, Richard Shusterman, Robert Kraut, Terry Diffey, T.R. Quigley, R.B. Palmer, Keith Keating, Peter Lamarque, Garry Hagberg, Charles Altieri, Martin Jay, and many others.

Celebrated scholars of the time like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, Mircea Eliade, Monroe Beardsley, John Hospers, John Fisher, Meyer Abrams, John Boulton, and many renowned foreign and Indian scholars were Members of the Editorial Board of the journal.

JCLA is indexed and abstracted in the MLA International Bibliography, Master List of Periodicals (USA), Ulrich's Directory of Periodicals, ERIH PLUS, The Philosopher's Index (Philosopher's Information Center), EBSCO, ProQuest (Arts Premium Collection, Art, Design & Architecture Collection, Arts & Humanities Database, Literature Online – Full Text Journals, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Central Essentials), Abstracts of English Studies, Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (ABELL), WorldCat Directory, ACLA, India Database, Gale (Cengage Learning), International Directory of Philosophy (PDC), Bibliography History of Art (BHA), ArtBibliographies Modern (ABM), Literature Online (LION), Academic Resource Index, Book Review Index Plus, ArticleFirst (OCLC), Periodicals Index Online (PIO), Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers, CNKI, PhilPapers, Humanities Index (BHI), Google Scholar, Expanded Academic ASAP, BASE, Indian Documentation Service, Publication Forum (JuFo), Summon, J-Gate, MIAR (Matriz de Información para el Análisis de Revistas), United States Library of Congress, New York Public Library, BL on Demand and the British Library. The journal is also indexed in numerous university (central) libraries, state, and public libraries, and scholarly organizations/ learned societies databases.

